

JUDITH ROCHELLE

Last Ride
on the
MERRY-GO-ROUND



Last Ride on the Merry-go-round
by Judith Rochelle

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The last time Ethan Caine had called him for a favor, he'd ended up racing through the Quintana Roo jungle in Mexico with an AK 47 under his arm and a scared kid over his shoulder. Now another child was in danger and her identity put a whole new face on things.

Well, hell.

Saying no to his closest friend wasn't an option. His calendar was clear. He'd just completed an operation for his "silent" partners so one wasn't likely to pop up in the immediate future. The two small fishing charters he had booked could be referred out.

He put his feet up on the desk and leaned his head back, his mind trying to wrap itself around the situation. This was personal, and Ethan Caine with a personal agenda was like a mountain lion with fresh meat in his jaw.

Not to mention the fact that this one involved Jennifer LaCroix. More than eight years had passed since the last time Dino saw her, partying with Ethan's wild crowd, looking for the edge in every situation. And now she'd somehow gotten herself mixed up in the stolen antiquities trade, one of the most lucrative yet most dangerous businesses in the world. Wars had been fought over artifacts looted from tombs and museums. Murder committed without the blink of an eye. How the hell had party girl Jen gotten herself in this kind of mess?

Sighing, knowing that he was stepping into a big tar pit, he picked up the phone and dialed a familiar number.

"Crank up the chopper. We're invited to breakfast."

Reviews for Judith Rochelle

"There are many surprises in LOVE WITH A PROPER RANCHER; trust me; you will not be able to put the book down. It is a great book and I highly recommend it."

~*The Romance Studio (5 hearts)*

"Read LOVE WITH A PROPER RANCHER, I guarantee you'll enjoy it."

~*TwoLips Reviews*

"In REDEMPTION, Judith Rochelle has written an intense read that will satisfy lovers of romantic suspense novels."

~*Long and Short Reviews (Top Pick)*

"This action-packed story [REDEMPTION] hooks you from the start with its intriguing characters and plot. You might guess the big reveal a bit early, but it doesn't make the journey any less interesting."

~*Romantic Times (4 stars)*

"In REDEMPTION Ms. Rochelle has written an action packed story that will keep you reading until the early morning hours."

~*My Book Cravings*

"In ONE HOT TEXAS NIGHT Ms. Judith Rochelle has fully developed her main couple in the same exacting manner as she always does."

~*The Romance Studio (4 Hearts)*

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Last Ride

on the

Merry-Go-Round

a sequel to Redemption

by

Judith Rochelle

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

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Dedication

To my son, Steven, who inspired the series;
to my editor, Ally, who makes my stories sing;
to the real Dino who does a job few people want; and to my
wonderful husband, David,
who keeps me sane, encourages my insanity, and loves me
beyond measure.

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Prologue

Michigan, somewhere north of Detroit

Jennifer Sutherland wasn't sure how long they'd hidden in the air duct, her daughter tucked close against her. The space was barely big enough to hold the two of them, and with their bodies blocking the flow of air it was stifling. The only ventilation now came from the grill through which they could see the room below. They were both covered with a fine sheen of perspiration, not all of it due to the heat of confinement. But the location was high up and kept them hidden from the men below.

John had shoved them up into the vent when they heard the car pull up outside, his body tight with panic. Now the sound of angry voices carried up to them, two strangers shouting, John arguing back. His revelation earlier in the day had been shocking enough, slamming into her with the force of a truck. She'd been sick with the knowledge ever since, wondering if she ever really knew the man she'd married.

Hearing the same story from the lips of others only made the nausea bubble up from her stomach. She swallowed hard, forcing it back. How had they ever gotten into this nightmare, from which there was no waking up?

Calm. She had to be calm. And absolutely still and silent. She had the little girl's face pressed against her body, barely allowing her to breathe. One tiny sound and danger would come calling.

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The argument escalated, then John's voice pleading, begging. A stranger answered him, his tone cold and harsh and unforgiving. Threatening. Demanding.

"Doing this was a stupid move to begin with," one of the men was saying. "But to choose these particular pieces was suicidal."

"Actually, I think it was pretty smart on his part," another voice said. "He can score enough on the sale of these to disappear with his family and live well for the rest of his life."

"Ah, yes," the first man said. "The family. If you don't have the pieces then your wife does. Or she knows where they're hidden. Your ace in the hole, right?"

"You know he was going to get them," the second man put in. "His wife and kid are probably waiting there for him, so it's a given they know where the pieces are."

"Then we need to find her and see what she can tell us." Scuffling of feet. "Where the hell is she, Sutherland?"

"No. Stay away from her. She knows nothing about this."

"Really? I think you're lying to us. Maybe when we get our hands on that cute little girl of yours, your wife will be more willing to cooperate than you are."

"You leave them alone." John, sounding scared and angry at the same time.

"Or, what? Do they just think you're all going on some kind of vacation?"

"They have nothing to do with this. They don't know a thing about it."

The noise of a struggle, just beyond Jen's line of vision. The sound of the gunshot, like a cannon going off in the small

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room below, was so unexpected she flinched. Her arm tightened convulsively around Deanne. Through the grill she saw John crumple, blood blooming like a rose on the front of his shirt as he collapsed to the floor. One more shot, his body twitched, and he lay still.

Up in the ductwork, Jen nearly choked on her sobs, her hands quickly covering her daughter's eyes to block out the sight.

"We'll find them," the man with the gun said. "They can't be far. He wouldn't separate himself from them for too long. Especially if he left the pieces with them."

"Then we'd better start looking. We'll check all the rooms. There's got to be something there to tell us where he stashed them. Or where the woman and child are. If we can't find the pieces, we have to find them."

"We will. By the time we get through with them they'll tell us what we want to know."

Jen felt as if she was holding her breath while the sounds of the search echoed through the small cabin. She could hear the rage in their voices as they argued about the lack of results.

"Let's get out of here," said the man who seemed to be in charge. "See if we can pick up a trail."

"What if we can't find them?" There was an edge of panic in the voice.

"Then we'd damn well better find a hiding place for ourselves, someplace the boss won't find us. If there is such a place."

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Jen heard heavy footsteps, then the front door to the cabin opening and closing. Her every instinct was to scramble out of their hiding place, but she forced herself to wait for what seemed an eternity. Time enough for them to get tired of looking. One hour. Two hours. The minute hand on her watch crept by with agonizing slowness, but she had to be sure the men were gone.

Deanne had mercifully fallen asleep.

Finally, when it was dark, Jen pushed out the grill, dropped down to the floor and reached up for the child.

"I'm scared," the tiny voice said.

"Me, too, sweetheart. But we'll be fine. I promise."

Jennifer hugged her daughter. Deanne had been so good, as if she sensed the menace ready to grab them if she moved or spoke. "We'll be fine, sweetie," she whispered, her mouth next to the child's ear. "But we need to get out of here."

"But, Daddy..."

"Ssh."

Jennifer kept Deanne's face turned into her side until they were out of sight of the body. The suitcases were still packed in the bedrooms, open with all the contents scattered on the floor. She knew to leave them. If the men came back, their absence would be a dead giveaway. Anyway, John had been very clear about the preparations when he told her they were in trouble.

Trouble! What a laugh. That didn't even begin to describe their situation.

Taking her daughter's hand, she tugged her along. With each step, she paused and listened, hyperaware of the

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sounds outside, but all she heard was the rustling of leaves in the night breeze. They tiptoed through the back door, easing it open and pausing to listen again.

Still nothing.

Again she bent down so her mouth was right next to Deanne's ear. "We have to play a game, sweetheart. We have to leave right now. If you can keep from making a sound, you'll get a prize."

"But, Daddy," she tried again.

"Later, sweetheart. Please. Daddy wanted us to leave and that's what we have to do."

She could hear muted sobs escape the little mouth but the child was both smart for her young age, and obedient. Jen moved forward, easing away from the house, eyes scanning everywhere, searching for any movement. As they started toward the trees a hundred yards away, Deanne tugged on her hand and pointed to their car parked next to the cabin.

Jen shook her head and leaned down again.

"We're taking another car, sweetie. A special one Daddy left for us."

She could see the questions in the young eyes and bit down on her lip to keep from crying.

"Come, now. I'll explain later. Please?"

Slowly the child nodded, and they moved like smoky wraiths toward the trees.

When they finally reached the middle of the copse, Jennifer allowed herself a small sigh of relief. There it was, a shed hidden just as John had told her it would be. The door

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creaked as they pried it open. She waited to see if they'd attracted any attention.

She picked up the child and carried her into the shed, to a van loaded with supplies. Buckling Deanne into her seat belt, she fastened her own and cranked the engine. It purred like a contented cat and in seconds they were headed along a rough path through the woods, in the opposite direction from the one they'd taken when they arrived. She drove without headlights, afraid to do anything to identify their position, grateful for the bright moon.

She looked in the rearview mirror constantly, straining her eyes to see any movement in the blackness behind her, still not convinced someone wasn't lying in wait for them. A mixture of emotions clashed within her, but she had no time to sort them out or give in to them now. Later, maybe. If they were still alive.

At last they hit a paved road, but she had no idea where they were. Stopping to ask directions didn't seem like the greatest idea, so she blundered around for half an hour before she finally saw signs pointing toward the interstate. Five miles after that they were headed south. She could feel the fear of the child next to her, a feeling she shared but had to conceal.

After a long silence, Deanne asked, "Where are we going?"

Jen reached over and squeezed her hand. "To the one person I know who can help us, sweetheart. The one person who can make this all right."

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Chapter One

Key West, Florida

Dino Brancuzzi leaped soundlessly to the dock and finished tying off the lines on his boat. The boat was in darkness. The only light came from the few dim lampposts that lit the pier. He paused and scanned the area carefully, checking the surrounding boats, looking for signs of activity.

Nothing and no one seemed to be moving. At that hour of the night—or morning, as it actually was—he didn't expect anything to happen but he never let down his guard. That led to disaster.

Everything appeared normal.

Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a small remote. He whistled softly and two men appeared on deck at the rail. Dressed in black, as he was, they moved forward at his signal. One click of the remote and the pier lights were extinguished. They'd have to hurry. Who knew how long they had before some tenant popped out to gripe there was trouble with the lighting again.

One of the men silently negotiated the ladder to join Dino on the pier. They both reached out to help the third man make his descent. He moved slowly, obviously injured and favoring one side of his body, but soon they were all heading along the pier in the darkness.

They moved as quickly as possible to the parking lot separated from the pier by a chain-link fence. Minutes later, Dino watched as the two men climbed into a black SUV, ready

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to head away from the marina. The man in the driver's seat rolled down his window a scant two inches.

"Good job, as always," he told Dino. "Thanks."

Dino nodded. "Take care of your friend there."

"Will do. You'll be hearing from me again."

Dino grinned. "I'm counting on it."

He watched as the SUV pulled out of the lot and made a left onto the highway before turning on its lights. When he was sure they were safely away, he turned on the pier lights again.

The trip back from the extraction zone had taken longer than he'd expected. Especially when they'd had to run without lights in certain parts of the Gulf. But it had all been worth it. Even the tiny nick in his arm from a bullet that came too close. In a week he'd be healed, adding one more scar to his growing collection.

Heading back through the gate, he began a slow walk down the pier. Although he was a big man, he'd learned over the years as a member of Scorpio to move almost soundlessly, with an economy of motion. He always dressed in black, knowing other colors reflected the light. He ran his hand over his hair, pulled taut in its usual ponytail to avoid getting in his way. Tonight he'd also covered his face with black camouflage so nothing would give him away.

Dino always liked to check everything before he locked up for the night, a habit long-ingrained in him. He had owned the marina for eight years and every inch of it was burned into his brain, as familiar as his own bed.

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He rented out several of the slips on a more or less permanent basis. Along with the fishing charters he took on now and then, it provided a nice cover for his operation and gave Blackwater Charters a higher level of legitimacy.

The snick of a sliding door opening caused him to swivel to the right. A man appeared on one of the boats, climbing up onto the deck.

"Hey, Dino," he called. "You'd better get those lights fixed. They keep conking out."

"It's just a glitch in the wiring," Dino called back. "Anyway," he joked, "for what you're doing, you shouldn't want any light."

The man laughed and disappeared back inside his boat.

Dino retraced his steps to his office at the shoreside end of the pier. Blackwater Charters was housed in what looked like little more than a shack at the head of the pier. But anyone trying to break in would set off multiple alarms—set to protect the inside—which would have been the envy of any technophile. High performance computers and communications gear lined two walls, securely bolted to shelves. A row of satellite phones sat in a rack next to his desk.

To the left of his desk, inside open cupboard doors, were a row of monitors hooked up to a state-of-the art security system. Those doors could be closed and locked when the wrong eyes might see them. The people who chartered him for deep sea fishing were completely unaware of the real work he did.

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He checked the monitors to make sure everything in the parking area, as well as the pier, was secure. No strays hanging around. No one who might have hidden and seen his passenger disembark. In the small bathroom off the office, he pulled a bottle of aspirin out of the medicine cabinet, shook three into his hand, and swallowed them dry.

Catching sight of himself in the mirror, he thought, *not bad for forty-two*. Except for the recent bullet scrape and some well-worn scars, he kept himself in excellent physical shape. Looking closely, he spotted a few more grey hairs in the ponytail, and a few more lines around his eyes. But he was still at the top of his game.

Leaning back in his chair, he tried to decide if he wanted to head out for a well-deserved drink at a bar, or go home and flop down on the couch and drink his own liquor. There was no one waiting for him at home. His last relationship, like all the others, ended when his 'friend' decided she wanted to make the sleepovers permanent and Dino ran like a scalded-ass ape.

He had felt only minor pangs of envy when his old friend, Ethan, married Lisa Mallory. Once upon a time, Dino had wanted the same things Ethan had now. But one slipup was enough to make him realize that home and hearth would never be for him. Too dangerous. For everyone involved.

He smiled to himself, thinking about the mission Ethan had undertaken for Lisa two years ago. What a rescue and extraction *that* job had been, plucking Lisa's son away from drug dealers in the middle of the Mexican jungle.

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When he'd given up the old life, Ethan had isolated himself at the family farm he inherited and done his best to drink himself to death. But Lisa had changed all that. Ethan had settled easily into family life, surprising everyone who knew him, both as a covert government agent and mercenary. He cleaned up his act and put his skills to use running a school for mercenaries and corporate security teams.

The huge barn about an acre behind the house had been rehabbed and turned into classrooms, an electronics center, and a huge gym. There was also a knockdown house for hostage rescue training and a state-of-the-art gun range. Dino also knew that Ethan still 'consulted' in certain situations, but tried to keep those to a minimum. He was mostly out of 'the life' now.

Lately, Dino wondered more and more what it would be like to have someone like Lisa in his life, but each time, he laughed at himself. He lived too much on the edge of danger and was too much of an adrenaline junkie to deal with a wife. He always managed to push those thoughts to the back of his mind.

He checked his answering machine for fishing charter bookings. He was rummaging through a drawer for a pencil when his private satellite phone rang.

"Yes?" He never gave his name when he answered until he knew who was at the other end.

"Hi. It's me. You up for a little trip, buddy?" Ethan's voice rumbled across the connection. Speak of the devil.

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Dino dropped into the chair. "I don't know. Depends where. You offering me an all expense paid vacation with a bevy of naked broads?"

"Please." Ethan laughed, although Dino heard the edge of strain in it. "I'm a respectable family man now. I don't deal in such debauchery."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah." Dino propped his feet on the desk. "So to what do I really owe the honor of this call at..." he looked at his watch, "...almost one in the morning."

"I hope you're sitting down."

"Lay it on me, Ethan. There isn't much you can say that would shock me."

"Oh yeah? Wait until you hear this."

* * * *

Tampa, Florida, Four hours earlier

The rain hadn't let up for one minute since they left the cabin in Michigan. The roads had been slick even on the super highways, and cars driving too fast had fishtailed, sending up great rooster tails of water that splashed the windshield of the van. Jen had been driving for what seemed like weeks instead of hours, every muscle in her body tense with the terror of what she'd seen, watching in her rearview mirror for any car that appeared too often, and dealing with the hazardous driving conditions.

She'd taken every precaution—on and off the interstate—that she'd learned in the life she had long ago. Driving through small towns and up and down side streets, pulling into large, crowded parking lots, and watching to see what

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cars came and went. Or hung around. Finally, when she was reasonably sure they didn't have a tail, she pulled back onto the interstate and headed south as fast as the speed limit would let her.

Throughout the long, desperate trip she did something she hadn't done in what seemed forever. She prayed. She was almost nauseous with fear, frightened of the men who'd killed John, wondering what the hell he'd gotten them into, and with absolutely no idea what her reception would be when she got to her destination. For all she knew, she and Deanne could be out on their asses five minutes after they got there.

She hadn't seen the man in years, had no idea what his life was like now. Did he even still live in the same place? Was there a woman in his life? Several women? That had often been his style. Was he even sober? God, what had she been thinking when she started in this direction?

Deanne. That's the only thing that had been on her mind. Safety for her daughter. And help getting these people off her back. She was smart enough to know that if they wanted to find her, there was really no place she could hide.

Except where she was going.

Thankfully, Deanne, whether from shock or exhaustion, had fallen asleep as soon as they hit the interstate. She'd slept off and on, waking whenever they stopped for food at a drive-through, eating in the car in a dark corner of the lot. Jen needed the coffee more than anything. The hamburger she'd eaten still sat like a lump of dough in her stomach. But Deanne needed food.

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When she absolutely couldn't keep her eyes open any longer, she pulled off into a small town, found a cheap motel where she didn't think anyone would look for her, and crashed. But the sound of gun shots kept echoing in her head and the scene at the cabin kept shattering her dreams. Finally, when she figured out being awake was better than being asleep, she took a long cold shower to wake herself up and pulled on her clothes.

Deanne was grumpy and whiny, not unexpected, but breakfast settled her down again before they got back on the road.

Now Jen had spent the last hour winding her way through Pinellas County, following a map in her head that was more than eight years old and wondering if the man she sought would even still be around. She let out a breath when she spotted a familiar street name, following it into a more rural area. The closer she got, the more she felt as if her heart had crawled up into her throat. Maybe she should just turn around...

She slid a glance at Deanne, awake now for the past two hours but silent as a mute. Jen knew they had to talk about what happened but at the moment she had no idea where to start. How to explain the shooting while they hid in the air duct?

Her daughter had to be terrified, the silence her way of coping with the shock of what she'd seen. Well, once they got situated ... *if* they got situated ... she'd handle it.

Right, Jen. Just like you've handled everything else in your life.

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And then there it was. The house she remembered. Only last time she'd seen it, the place had been surrounded by overgrown prairie grass and weeds and the paint had been visibly peeling. Through the spokes of a wrought iron gate, she could see the long drive to the house was paved and the grass had been cut down. A high wall surrounded the property, with a speaker box jutting out next to the gate.

Wow, Ethan. You must have made some pretty big changes in your life.

She pulled up to the gate, rolled down her window, and stuck her arm out in the pelting rain to press the button on the speaker box.

"Yes? Who is this?" The still familiar voice crackled in the storm-charged air.

"Ethan? Ethan, it's me. Jennifer. Jen LaCroix." He wouldn't know her married name and out here in the storm wasn't the place to explain.

"Jen?" Despite the noise from the rain and the static, she could hear the shock in his voice.

If you think you're shocked now, wait until you hear what I have to tell you.

"Yes. Can you open the gate and let us in?"

A brief pause. "Us? Who's with you?"

"No one who means you any harm," she told him impatiently. "Can you just open the gate? I'm getting soaked with the window open here."

"What is it? What do you want?"

"I need to see you." She gritted her teeth, listening to Deanne stir in the back seat. "I know it's been a long time but

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I wouldn't be here if it wasn't an emergency. Please, can we come in?"

Another pause. "All right. Come on ahead."

The gate swung open. Jen rolled up the window and drove slowly toward the big, rambling farmhouse. The front porch lights had come on as soon as the gate opened, and now Ethan Caine stood framed in the doorway. But as she drew up to the front steps, even through the rain, she could see it was a different Ethan Caine than she'd expected.

Like the house and the land, he'd undergone a transformation. His beard was trimmed and his hair was drawn back into a neat ponytail. He'd lost a good bit of weight and where once there had been burgeoning fat and softness, now beneath the T-shirt and jeans, she saw a hard muscular body. What the hell had happened to him?

The only thing familiar to her was the gun he held at his side.

"Mom?" Deanne had released her seat belt and slid over next to Jen. "Why does that man have a gun? Is he going to shoot someone, too?"

So she *had* seen something. Heard it, anyway. She hadn't said one word during the entire trip and Jen had been afraid to bring it up. All she'd wanted was to get somewhere to someone who could keep them safe.

A slender, dark-haired woman appeared behind Ethan, shoving an umbrella into his free hand and giving him a little push.

Aha! Even the wildest of the wild can be tamed, apparently.

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Ethan opened the umbrella and came down to the car, walking around to the driver's side.

"Hello, Jen."

"Please put the gun away," she told him. "You're scaring Deanne."

Shoving the gun in his pants at the small of his back, he pulled his shirt loose to cover it. He peered past her into the darkness, checking for any other movement, making sure no one had breached the security behind her.

"We're alone," she assured him. "Listen, can we please come inside? It's soaking wet outside and Deanne is freezing."

His eyes narrowed as he took in the child plastered to her side.

"Yours?"

"Of course," she snapped. "And she's exhausted. Are you going to let us in?"

Ethan waited for the space of one more heartbeat, then called out, "All clear." To Jen and Deanne he said, "Come on."

He held the umbrella while they both slid out of the car and moved under it as best they could. They made a soggy bunch as they hurried up the steps to the porch.

The dark-haired woman gave them a warm smile and held out her hands in a welcoming gesture.

"Hello. I'm Lisa Caine."

In a toneless voice, Ethan said, "Lisa, this is Jennifer LaCroix. And her daughter, Deanne. We knew each other a long time ago."

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"Come in. You're soaked and I'm sure you're exhausted." Her glance at Ethan was an I'll-talk-to-you-about-this later look.

"I'm sorry to barge in on you like this," Jen apologized, teeth chattering, "but I just didn't know where else to go." She tightened her arm around Deanne, who looked at Ethan with frightened eyes.

A young boy around ten years old materialized in the hallway, stationing himself close to Ethan.

"Everything okay, Dad?"

Dad?

"Everything's fine." Ethan raked his eyes over the pair in front of him. "Well, Jen. What's going on?"

Lisa made a disgusted sound in her throat. "Ethan, for God's sake. They'll catch pneumonia if you leave them standing there like this." She smiled at Jen. "Please let me help you into some dry clothes and get you something hot to drink."

"We have clothes in the car," Jen protested. "I can just dash out—"

"Absolutely not. Tomorrow will be time enough. I think I can outfit the two of you just fine for now."

"T-That would be wonderful. Thank you. I apologize—"

Lisa waved a hand at her. "Later." She smiled at the boy. "This is our son, Jamie. Honey, go to your room and get a pair of jeans and a T-shirt from the pile of last year's clothes we just cleaned out." She gave Jennifer an assessing look. "I think you and I are about the same size. We can make do."

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Deanne held tight to Jen's hand as they followed Lisa down a short hallway to one of the guest bedrooms. Jen remembered this room as one with its own bath but it certainly bore no resemblance to its former appearance. Green and white striped wallpaper covered two walls and the king-sized bed sported a matching comforter. A chair in solid green sat next to a little table in one corner. Jen tried to keep from staring.

Lisa caught her eye. "You've been here before."

"Once." Jen wet her lips. "A long time ago."

"It's all right." The warm smile appeared again. "I know Ethan had a life before he and I were married." She turned as Jamie came into the room. "Here's something for your daughter." She took the folded clothes the boy handed her, then pulled towels out of the narrow linen closet. "I think a hot shower would do you both good. By the time you're finished, I'll have something laid out on the bed for you."

"But you don't even know anything about us," Jennifer protested. "How can you be so calm with two complete strangers? Doesn't Ethan ... I mean, hasn't Ethan..."

Lisa smiled. "Ethan said you knew each other a long time ago. He let you in the house and didn't shoot you. That's good enough for me."

"This is really an awkward situation," Jen blurted out, stroking Deanne's damp hair. "I didn't expect ... I don't know what I expected."

"Well," Lisa grinned, "unless you're here trying to steal my husband it doesn't matter."

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"Nothing like that." Jen let out the breath she'd been holding. "We really need Ethan's help with something. We're in big trouble."

She watched Lisa study them, as if trying to see beyond their skin. After a moment, Lisa nodded. "If he can do anything, I know he will. Listen, we can talk later." Lisa looked at the child who was clinging to her mother like a barnacle. "Hot shower, then a hot drink. Do you prefer coffee or tea?"

"Tea with a little brandy, if that's all right."

"No problem."

Jen let Deanne shower first, checking frequently to make sure the seven-year-old was all right. Then she wrapped her in one of the big towels and sat her on the closed lid of the commode while she took her own shower. She stood under the hot water, trying to assess the situation she'd walked into. Her memories of Ethan were nearly eight years old, and seeing him with his act cleaned up, married to an extraordinary woman with a son who obviously worshiped him was a shocker.

Ethan hadn't been married when Jen had known him eight years ago. Maybe Jamie was Lisa's son by another man. Or, maybe Ethan had been with Lisa before Jen knew him, but they'd parted, then ended up back together. Jen didn't know and was too exhausted to try to sort it out. However it had come about, Ethan Caine was the last man she'd ever expect to settle down, but apparently he thrived on it. And there was no mistaking the fact he was very much in love with his wife. Jen realized just what a shallow imitation of this she'd had

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with John, and wondered if she'd ever have one more chance to catch the brass ring like Ethan did. Was there someone out there who would accept her as she was, as Lisa apparently did with Ethan, and love her and Deanne?

She might have stayed under the water until it turned ice cold if Deanne hadn't called to ask her if she was ever going to be finished. She dried hastily and they dressed in their borrowed clothes. They were just walking into the kitchen when she heard Ethan's low voice, the words indistinguishable. Then Lisa asked, "Really? I wonder how she found you. Could she have contacted someone you're working with now? Would she even know who to call?"

"Since Ethan apparently hasn't mentioned it, he brought me here once, years ago. Ethan, do you remember?"

They both turned at the sound of her voice, wearing identical startled looks.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to eavesdrop. Anyway, I guess my brain just remembered how to get here." She looked around the room. "I must say the place bears little resemblance to what I saw then. I guess you get the congrats for that, Lisa."

"Actually, it was a joint operation." Lisa looked up at him and smiled. "We work well together."

This is an extraordinary woman, Jen thought. I could never handle this the way she is.

"Thanks for the clothes, by the way." She felt uncomfortable wearing clothes from Ethan's wife but the woman was so gracious she could hardly make an issue of it.

"Well, the outfits won't make a fashion statement," Lisa grinned, "but at least they aren't soaking wet. In the morning

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we'll get your stuff out of your car. I made some hot tea and spiked it with Ethan's best brandy. And I've got hot chocolate for ... Deanne, is it?"

"Yes." Jen hugged her daughter close to her. "Sweetie, Mommy has to talk privately with Mr. Caine and his wife. Okay?" She looked at Ethan. "Would it be possible for your son to find something to occupy Deanne for a while? Maybe a video game or something? She's pretty good at them, even at her age."

Ethan and Lisa looked at their son, a signal passing among them.

Jamie had obviously learned his cues a long time ago. He pushed back his chair and stood up. "Sure. Come on," he said to Deanne. "You like video games? I've got some cool ones I can show you."

"No, Mom." Deanne pushed herself even closer to her mother's body. "I want to stay in here with you. Please." She clung as if her life depended on it.

Jen disengaged her arms and kissed her forehead. "It will be all right, honey. Nothing bad is going to happen here. I told you when I decided to come here that Mr. Caine could protect us and he will. I just have to talk to him and tell him what happened, okay?"

"But—"

"No buts. Go with Jamie. Let us talk and then I'll tell you exactly what's going on. Okay? Can you trust me on this?"

Jen hugged and kissed her daughter, murmuring to her soothingly before she could get Deanne to finally release her and reluctantly follow Jamie down the hall. Jen dropped into a

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chair at the table, not sure how much longer her legs would hold her, and took a grateful sip from the cup Lisa set in front of her.

"Protect you?" Ethan casually took a swallow of his coffee from the mug he was holding. "Protect you from what?"

Oh, God. Where do I start?

Jennifer sighed. "It's a long story, and not a very pleasant one, I'm afraid."

"No offense intended, Jen, but with you I wouldn't expect any different."

"Ethan!" Lisa's voice had a scolding edge to it. "My God, let the woman tell us what's going on before you start throwing barbs at her."

Jen fiddled with her tea cup. "It's all right. Ethan, I know how you feel about me. Believe me, if I had other choices I wouldn't be here. But Deanne and I are in big, big trouble. I just couldn't think who else to ask."

He narrowed his eyes. "Why not? It isn't as if we just saw each other yesterday."

Jennifer picked up her spoon and deliberately stirred sugar into the brandy-laced tea, her eyes on the dark liquid as she tried to figure out how he was going to react to her news. Her heart hammered against her ribs and all her breath felt trapped in her throat. She was about to play her trump card and she had no idea what would happen when she did.

"Because you're the only one who'd have a vested interest in doing so," she told him.

"Yeah? And exactly why is that?"

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Now she looked at him, her gaze holding his, aware of Lisa watching them with curiosity. "Because, Deanne is your daughter."

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Chapter Two

The room vibrated with shockwaves. Ethan stared at Jen across the table. His face was as unreadable as a mask but Jen saw the reaction in the darkening of his eyes.

The silence stretched endlessly.

Jen dropped her eyes, unable now to look at either Ethan or his wife. She concentrated on stirring her tea.

Ethan had tilted back in his chair, resting it on the back legs, something Jen had seen him do a hundred times. Now he slammed forward and the legs hit the floor with a sound that cracked like a rifle shot. "I don't believe it."

"Ethan, listen." Jen wrapped her hands around her cup, their trembling obvious. "I was afraid ... no, I knew you would say that. But I promise you, it's the truth. I swear by all that's holy."

Now a hodgepodge of emotions raced across Ethan's face. Jen could imagine what he was thinking. A daughter. A child. He had fathered a child and didn't even know it. Until tonight.

"Oh, right. You wouldn't know holy if it came up and spit in your face."

"Ethan. That won't solve anything." Lisa's voice was soft, barely concealing her own unsettled feelings.

"It's all right." Jennifer waved a shaking hand. "He's said worse."

And what did I expect, anyway?

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"What the hell am I supposed to say?" Anger leeches into his voice. "You show up here after eight years and drop this in my lap? How come this is the first time I'm hearing about it?"

"Who could find you at that time to tell you anything?" she snapped. "Would you even have been sober enough to understand? Or do anything about it?" She glanced over at Lisa. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't ... I don't know how much Ethan's told you..."

"I know everything about him I need to." Lisa's voice was steadier now.

Interesting, Jen thought. I didn't think Ethan Caine would ever open up to anyone. This must be one amazing woman.

"Well, anyway," she continued, "after a while it didn't matter. I just ... moved on with my life."

Ethan rocked back in his chair again and the awful silence resettled.

"So," he drawled at last. "Isn't this an interesting piece of news. How old is she, did you say?"

"Seven. It happened almost eight years ago, the last time—"

"I think we can pass on some of the details," he snapped. "We all know ... how babies are made. So. Eight years is a long time. How do you even know it ... she's ... mine? She could be anybody's, right?"

Jen glanced from Ethan to Lisa and back to Ethan. She twisted her fingers together in an attempt to conceal how badly her hands were shaking, but anger began to creep through the fear that was choking her. She couldn't look at Lisa while she emptied out the details of her past with Ethan.

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"Because you were the only one I slept with, the only one I had slept with in a long while, around the time she was conceived. You can believe it or not, but it's the damned truth."

Ethan's lips twisted. "Like I'm going to believe you. I know you, Jen. Remember?"

Lisa rose from her chair. "I think maybe I need to leave you two alone for this discussion. I really don't have a place in it."

Ethan reached out a hand and gripped her arm. "Stay right where you are, Lisa. You're my wife. There's nothing I have to hide from you. Not anymore."

Jennifer stared at both of them. Was this the Ethan Caine she'd known so long ago? The man who shared nothing with anyone? "No secrets, Ethan? Your life has certainly changed. It used to be one big secret."

"Not these days." Jen watched the way his hand caressed his wife's arm, feeling something close to envy. "Lisa knows everything there is to know about me. Good and bad. But let's get back to the present, shall we?"

"I swear to you, Deanne is your daughter."

She reached into the pocket of the jeans she wore, pulling out a folded sheet of paper she'd stuck in there after her shower. Hand still shaking, she reached out to give it to Ethan. "Maybe this will answer some questions."

"Yeah? What is it? An affidavit? Big fucking deal."

"Ethan! Enough." Lisa's voice was louder, firmer.

"It's the results of a DNA test." Jen licked her dry lips. "I had it done a long time ago. Just in case I ever needed it."

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"What, exactly, did you use for comparison?" he asked.

"I found an old comb of yours in the bathroom that still had enough strands of hair in it for testing purposes."

Ethan stared at the paper for a long moment as if it might bite him. The lines in his face had deepened and his eyes were the color of a dark storm.

"Go on," Jen urged. "Take it. You can have your own test done to compare. But while we're waiting for the results and doing nothing, she and I could both end up dead. I mean, why the hell else would I drive hundreds of miles to find you?"

"Because you had no one else to turn to?"

"Because no one else would care enough to help us. But a father will want to protect his daughter."

Ethan got up to refill his mug, leaving the sheet of paper lying on the table. When he didn't even glance at the bottle of brandy on the counter, Jen realized what an enormous impact this woman had had on his life. The old Ethan Caine would have filled the cup half full with the liquor. He really *had* cleaned up his act. Good. That meant he'd be that much sharper in this situation.

"All right." The tic of a muscle in his jaw was the only sign that he was keeping a tight control on himself. "And yes, I plan on having a DNA test run, but there are ways I can expedite it. For now, I'd like to know what actually did bring you out in the middle of a driving rain from ... where the hell did you come from, anyway?"

"Michigan. Outside of Detroit."

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He furrowed his brow. "You must have been driving a hell of a long time."

"And she's exhausted," Lisa pointed out. "You can give her the third degree tomorrow. Let's just cut to the chase for right now."

Ethan gave a reluctant nod, his face still expressionless. "Okay, Jen. *Reader's Digest* version."

"All right." Jen inhaled and let the breath out slowly. "When I discovered I was pregnant with Deanne I wasn't sure what to do. Abortion wasn't a choice, at least not for me." She hurried on at the look on Ethan's face. "But I obviously couldn't run around and keep doing ... what we were doing. I needed to make a living and a stable home for my child."

"Were you in Detroit at the time?" Ethan asked.

Jen nodded. "Yes. That's where I happened to be when I found out the news, and it seemed as good a place as any to set down some roots. Try to make a home for the baby and me."

"But you had to earn a living."

"Believe it or not, Ethan, I'm a damned good graphic artist. And I had some money set aside to keep me going until I could get work. I decided to set up my own business, from home, so I wouldn't have to worry about day care for the baby."

"You could have called me," Ethan pointed out.

Jen gave a very unladylike snort. "Come on, Ethan. We both know a child is the very last thing you would have wanted to be involved with then. And where the hell would I find you, anyway? Some jungle or desert? Or a dive bar in a

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strange corner of the world?" Another long breath. "Anyway, I was doing some work on presentation brochures for the Tate Museum. John Sutherland, the director, had his eye on me for a long time. He asked me out several times and I finally said yes."

"Did he know you were pregnant?"

She nodded. "But it didn't seem to matter to him. When he asked me to marry him, he just wanted my assurance that the baby's father wouldn't come barging in one day and cause problems."

"None of this sounds very dangerous." Ethan stirred sweetener into his coffee.

"I thought I was marrying into the ideal, safe situation, as a matter of fact." She twisted her mouth in a grimace. "I was sure that after all these years and all these spins on the merry-go-round I'd finally caught the brass ring. Little did I know I was walking into a nightmare."

"What do you mean? Did he beat you? Molest Deanne?"

She saw Ethan's face darken at the thought. "No, no. Nothing like that." The words spilled out of her mouth. "John had a ... gambling problem. He belonged to a private club and he'd been on a prolonged losing streak. I had absolutely no idea about it, I swear to you. A lot of nights he came home very late, but he said he was involved with museum business."

Ethan's face was like granite. "Just where did you think he was all those nights he was out losing the moon?"

She shrugged. "Museum business. I had no reason to question him."

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"So someone got their hooks into him."

Jen nodded, smiling gratefully at Lisa who took her cup to refill. "All he had to do was use the cover of the museum to smuggle antiquities into the country for private buyers. Whoever was controlling him took it from there."

"Stolen antiquities." Ethan rubbed his jaw. "That's become the latest hot topic. Are you aware that a lot of time the enormous sums of cash that change hands are used to fund terrorist cells?"

Jen felt the blood drain from her face. "No, I'm not." She smoothed her bangs back from her forehead. "Jesus."

"All right, go ahead," he prompted.

"Yes, well, that's not even the worst of it. I guess John thought he could get out from under if he could just make one big score. So he held out two very valuable pieces from a shipment to sell."

"And of course they discovered it," Ethan snorted. "Guys like these are no dummies. They always have a specific manifest. How the hell did he expect to get away with pulling this off?"

"I don't know." Her voice trembled. "All I do know is he came home four days ago, told us to pack everything we could, and drove us to a cabin he'd rented. But they must have followed us."

She gave him every detail of what transpired from the minute John had shoved them into the air conditioning duct until they finally crept out after dark. Including watching John shot to death.

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"And Deanne saw all of this?" Ethan's voice was deadly quiet.

"I covered her eyes when I saw what was happening. And when we left I kept her turned away from the body. But she heard the arguing. The gun shots. And she's barely said a word since we left the cabin. I have to find a way to explain this to her." She swallowed the last of her tea. "Ethan, I don't know who these people are but there's something else going on here, something about those particular pieces. The men told John if he didn't have the artifacts then I must. He said he'd find us, use Deanne to make me tell them, then kill us both. And I don't doubt for a minute that's exactly what they'd do."

"What about the cabin? Could you find it again?"

Jen frowned. "Why?"

"Don't you want John's body found? Besides that, if we can trace the ownership of the cabin, we can get a handle on who's involved in this. Maybe the kingpin."

She shook her head. "All I know is we blundered around on back roads for what seemed like hours before I finally saw signs for the interstate. I wish I could be more help."

"Okay. We'll worry about it later. The body isn't going anywhere. And maybe the longer it stays undiscovered the better it will be for us." Ethan kept his voice low and even, but there was a steel quality to it. "Truth or dare time, Jen. Do you have any idea where these pieces are?"

"No." She met Ethan's gaze without flinching. "I swear to you. I didn't even know what was going on until John rushed us out of the house and out of the city. Even then he gave me

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a very abbreviated version. But I sure heard plenty stuck up in that duct for hours."

"How did you get away?"

She told him about the hidden car, waiting hours until dark before sneaking out to it, the emergency supplies it contained. "I guess John was really making preparations for a getaway."

He started to rise from his chair. "Do you think anyone could have followed you here?"

"No." Jen clenched her fists in her lap in an effort to keep her fragile control from fracturing. "For one thing we have a different car than we used when we left the house. For another, I still remember some of the driving lessons from the famous Ethan Caine."

One corner of his mouth lifted in a half-grin. "Thanks for the compliment, but I think I'll beef up the security a little, just in case."

As he walked out of the room, Jamie spoke up from the kitchen doorway.

"Mom?"

Lisa drew in a breath and smiled at her son. "Yes, honey?"

"The girl doesn't want to play games. She's lying on my bed crying. I tried to get her to stop but she won't talk to me. What should I do?"

Lisa pushed back her chair. "We should let her and her mother get to bed. Jen, why don't you go with Jamie to get Deanne? What you need right now is a good night's rest. Both of you."

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Jen carried her cup to the sink and turned to follow Jamie just as Ethan came back into the room.

"I need to make some calls," he told her. "Safety is the first issue, but finding these people is the only thing that will put a stop to the situation."

"Are you going to do that? Help us?" Jen held her breath, too afraid for Deanne not to show her desperation.

"Yes, but not quite the way you think. For one thing, I have to consider my family. I can't go haring off the way I used to. For another, I run a security training school now that holds classes every day. I have a hand-picked crew that helps me with it."

She felt the bottom drop out of her stomach. Had this trip all been for nothing?

"So where does that leave Deanne and me?"

"Right here for the moment. Safe and secure. I'll coordinate everything and use my contacts but I'm going to get some help with this. Someone to take the lead."

"Oh? And who would that be?" *Who is he going to turn us over to? Some stranger?*

"I don't think you'll be unhappy, but I'd rather wait until I've got it all in place before we talk about it, okay? Go on to bed with Deanne, and I'll tell you everything at breakfast."

Forcing herself to be calm, she nodded. She trusted Ethan or she never would have come here in the first place. "All right. Jamie, lead on."

As she followed the boy down the hall, she heard Ethan, obviously on the phone, saying, "Hi. It's me. You up for a little trip, buddy?"

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Chapter Three

Dino clicked off the phone and closed his eyes, rubbing his fingers across his forehead. So Ethan had a daughter. One he'd never known about. That must have been a shocker. He could just imagine Ethan's reaction when Jennifer LaCroix and her child showed up on his doorstep. Scared to death about something.

The last time Ethan Caine had called him for a favor, he'd ended up racing through the Quintana Roo jungle in Mexico with an AK 47 under his arm and a scared kid over his shoulder. Now another child was in danger and her identity put a whole new face on things.

Well, hell.

Saying no to his closest friend wasn't an option. His calendar was clear. He'd just completed an operation for his "silent" partners so one wasn't likely to pop up in the immediate future. The two small fishing charters he had booked could be referred out.

He put his feet up on the desk and leaned his head back, his mind trying to wrap itself around the situation. This was personal, and Ethan Caine with a personal agenda was like a mountain lion with fresh meat in his jaw.

Not to mention the fact that this one involved Jennifer LaCroix. More than eight years had passed since the last time Dino saw her, partying with Ethan's wild crowd, looking for the edge in every situation. And now she'd somehow gotten herself mixed up in the stolen antiquities trade, one of the

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most lucrative yet most dangerous businesses in the world. Wars had been fought over artifacts looted from tombs and museums. Murder committed without the blink of an eye. How the hell had party girl Jen gotten herself in this kind of mess?

Sighing, knowing that he was stepping into a big tar pit, he picked up the phone and dialed a familiar number.

"Crank up the chopper. We're invited to breakfast."

* * * *

There was surprisingly little air traffic on the trip up from Key West. Dino gave Mike Hogan the briefest possible description of his conversation with Ethan when they met at the air field.

"That's all I know. Ethan wouldn't have called if he didn't need us. You know that."

"Well, I imagine we'll find out the details when we get there. How's that arm of yours?"

Dino subconsciously touched the bandage underneath his shirt sleeve. It ached but nothing the aspirin he'd popped wouldn't take care of. Hazards of the trade. "I'm good."

"You're the boss," Mike said. He completed his preflight check and stowed his clipboard. "Okay. Let's do it."

They swung out over the Gulf of Mexico and hugged its coastline, the rising sun a yellow ball on their right. Dino slipped on his aviator shades and tilted his head back against the seat.

"Wake me when we get there," he said over the headset.

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He hadn't seen Jen LaCroix in years. He remembered a slender blonde with rich, honey-colored hair and eyes the color of the Gulf of Mexico. At the time she'd definitely been Ethan's property and they honored a strict hands-off rule. But if circumstances had been different, if he'd met her first, who knows what might have happened with the two of them.

Would she remember him? He was hardly the wild man she'd met, but he still lived life on the edge. Just differently.

How would she feel when she learned what Ethan's plans were, and that they involved him? He could hardly believe that she was the mother of a child with Ethan. That must have been a damn shock for him. And how the hell had she gotten herself in a situation like this?

Realizing that for the moment he had no answers to the questions zipping through his mind, he closed his eyes and dozed off. Ethan had always said Dino was the only person he knew who could fall asleep instantly in a helicopter.

It seemed as if only seconds had passed when Mike tapped Dino's arm and pointed down. Below them was the Caine farmland, acres of wild grasses, except for the area around the house and the newly built training facility. He saw the back door of the house open and Ethan, in jeans and T-shirt, walk toward the landing area, bending low against the wash of rotors.

"I hope that breakfast is damned good." He grinned at Ethan, shaking hands with him.

"No kidding." Mike took his turn shaking Ethan's hand. "I had to throw a hot body out of my bed."

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"Yeah, yeah, yeah." Ethan returned the grins, then his face sobered. "We have a few little problems, gents. I'm hoping you can help me with them. And Dino, thanks for agreeing to take Jen back with you."

"How did she react to all that?" He walked slowly toward the house beside Ethan.

"I haven't exactly told her yet."

Dino and Mike stopped and looked at him.

"You haven't told her?" Dino asked. "Now isn't that just swell."

Ethan's face hardened. "Believe me, she won't have much choice. You'll agree when you hear everything. Now come on. Lisa's got breakfast cooking."

Jamie was sitting at the table drinking juice and Lisa was at the stove cooking when the three men entered the house. Dino went at once to Lisa and squeezed her in a bear hug. Mike settled for a chaste kiss on the cheek.

"Hey, hey, hey," Ethan said. "That's my wife you're mauling."

"And who better to do it than us," Mike wisecracked.

"It's really good to see you again." Lisa grinned.

"How's our favorite young guy?" Mike held his hand out to Jamie.

"Doing great." His eyes widened. "Do I get a ride in the copter today?"

"Not today, son," Ethan told him. "We have some business to take care of and then these guys have to take off."

"Next time," Dino assured him.

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At that moment Jen and Deanne came into the kitchen and Dino felt as if someone had punched him. Gone was the exotic blonde who'd tantalized so many men. This woman, rather than being slender, was almost painfully thin. Her hair was still the same taffy color, thick and full, but she had it scraped back in a ponytail, making her features stand out in stark relief and accenting the deep circles under pale green eyes. She looked as if she'd barely slept and everything about her screamed fear.

Her eyes widened when she saw him.

"Dino?"

Was that a blush staining her cheeks? Jennifer LaCroix blushing?

"Hi, Jen. Good to see you, even if the circumstances aren't the greatest."

He took her hand, lifted it and kissed her fingers with his usual gallantry, but when he looked into her eyes something fractured in his well-protected heart. This wasn't just fear he was seeing. It was full blown terror, and all his carefully controlled protective instincts roared to life. Not to mention the vestiges of feelings he thought were dead and buried. How the hell was he going to do this?

She gave him a weak smile. "Good to see you, too, after all this time. Are you the cavalry Ethan called in?"

"Seems that way." He glanced at the dark-haired little girl, also stick-thin, glued to her mother's side like an extra appendage. Her long brown hair had been pulled back into a ponytail like her mother's and her eyes reflected the same fear. It wasn't hard, though, for him to see Ethan in her

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features. "You must be Deanne. I'm Dino, a friend of your mother's."

The child just stared at him mutely, the same terror in her eyes he'd seen in Jen's. He shifted his gaze back to Jennifer, who looked at him as if she was facing a death sentence. Something bad was going on here.

Lisa dried her hands on a paper towel. "Deanne, would you like to have some orange juice?"

Deanne nodded, her arms still wrapped around Jen's leg.

"I'll get it." Jamie hopped up and went to the fridge.

"Thank you, Jamie. That would be nice. Come on, sweetheart," Lisa coaxed. "Come sit down at the table here."

Deanne looked terrified of letting go of her mother, but Jen bent down and whispered to her and she eventually nodded and hitched herself quietly into a chair.

Ethan set down the mug he was holding and headed for the door. "Jen, I'd better put your car in the barn. Just in case."

Dino studied Jen through narrowed eyes. "It's a shame your little girl has to go through this," he commented.

"Children shouldn't have to put up with that kind of fear."

He saw her entire body tense. "Listen, Dino..."

Lisa broke into the conversation. "Jen, do you think Deanne would like to play video games with Jamie until breakfast is ready? I guess she wasn't in much of a mood to play last night." She looked at her son. "That okay with you, sweetheart?"

Deanne slipped off her chair and buried her face against Jen's chest.

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Jen kissed her on the forehead and stroked her hair. "Go on, sweetie. You need to have some fun for a little bit. It's okay. We just need to talk. Like last night, remember?"

"You won't go off and leave me, will you?" The child's voice held a terrible note of desperation.

"I'll be right here whenever you want to find me. Now go ahead. Go with Jamie. Okay?"

"Come on." Jamie coaxed, holding out a hand to her. "I've got a brand new game I haven't even opened yet. You can be the first to try it."

As soon as they were well out of the room, Jen turned back to Dino. "Has Ethan told you what's going on?"

"Not all of it but the necessary part," he said in a soft voice. "Enough to get me up here from the Keys first thing this morning. Jen, I'm so sorry this is happening to you."

"I guess you think it's my fault." Jen stuck out her jaw defensively.

Lisa carried the carafe to the table and began refilling cups. She paused and looked directly into Jen's eyes. "I don't think anyone here is going to judge anyone else. I was married to a man who turned out to be a drug addict, a criminal, and an abuser. He faked his own death and kidnapped his own son, so I certainly don't point fingers at anyone."

Dino saw the shock slash across Jen's face. "My God! Are you talking about Jamie?"

A faraway look came into Lisa's eyes, as if she were reliving the nightmare all over again. Then she closed her eyes, and when she opened them the look was gone. "Ethan

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got him back for me. That's how we met." A soft smile curved her lips. "And fell in love."

"You look like you have a good thing going here," Jen persisted. "You can't be too happy to have someone from his old life just drop in like this."

"If it hadn't been for his old life, I'd never have gone to Ethan for help. Without his skills and contacts he'd never have been able to get Jamie back." She nodded at Dino and Mike. "Ethan and these men saved Jamie and me. That's the kind of debt you can never repay. Our marriage is rock solid. If Ethan can help you and Deanne, then he has my full support."

"Despite the paternity thing?" Jen pushed.

"It's a fact we can't ignore. I didn't know Ethan then so..." She let the words trail off. Deanne was a factor she was just going to accept.

Jen's lips twisted. "I'm not sure I'd be quite so gracious if the situation were reversed."

"It isn't important."

Jen shook her head. "How the hell did he find someone like you?"

Lisa's mouth curved into a smile. "He and my brother are best friends, but Ethan and I couldn't stand each other for a long time. Now. Breakfast will be on the table in a few minutes."

The side door slammed and everyone looked up as Ethan re-entered the kitchen.

"Good thing it's Saturday and there aren't any classes today. I'd just as soon not have anybody on the grounds until

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I get things squared away here." He turned to Dino. "Thanks for doing this. The situation's complicated and I'm not as flexible as I used to be." He gathered Lisa into his arms in a bear hug and gave her a kiss that stopped just short of embarrassing the onlookers.

Jen opened her mouth as if to say something, but Dino caught her gaze and winked at her.

I'll take care of it, his look said. You don't have to worry. He was shocked to feel the jolt of electricity that suddenly zinged through him.

Oh, Lord, I'm in trouble here.

"How much do you know about the antiques market?" Ethan asked his friend, seating himself at the head of the table. "I had some ... situations dealing with it a few years ago, but I've been away from that aspect of things for a long time. I understand, though, it's escalated since then. I do know that items stolen from museums and archeological digs and smuggled into the country are worth more than diamonds. Collectors will pay any price for them. And where they were stolen from dictates how high the price goes."

"From what you said, that seems to be at the heart of the matter." Dino picked up his mug and sipped at the hot brew. He looked at her over the rim. "Am I right?"

Ethan nodded and looked at Jen. "Like I said last night, Jen's husband got himself in a no win situation. Now he's ... out of the picture and Jen and Deanne are in a great deal of danger. I'd say the only way to keep them safe is for us to find out who's behind this ring and ... fix it."

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"If we don't," Dino agreed, "they'll never have another day of peace in their lives."

"Wait, wait, wait." Jen fluttered a hand at them. "I didn't mean to drag everyone into this mess. I just need someplace for Deanne and me to hide out until it's over."

Ethan's face took on a hard look. "Jen, it will never be over as long as they're out there. Whoever *they* are. I've already made some calls just to get things started, but now we need to discuss exactly how we're going to handle this."

Jen stared at them, then dropped her head into her hands, but not before Dino had seen a hopeless look in those emerald eyes. He wanted to see the fire back, not that look of defeat.

"You know whoever's behind it has to be someone like—" Dino stopped and looked self-consciously at Lisa.

"Like Charles?" she finished softly. "It's all right. I don't think any of us will completely forget the man." She kissed Dino on the cheek. "But I can talk about him now without having hysterics."

She set platters of food on the table, then picked up the two plates she'd fixed for the children and headed down the hall toward Jamie's room.

"I appreciate you jumping in like this, Dino," Ethan told his friend.

Dino shrugged. It was a given that the two men would do anything for each other, any time. "No prob. So let's eat and get at it."

He winked at her again and was astonished once more to see her actually blush.

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Lisa handed the filled plates to Jamie. "Here you are. You can take your food back in your room. I think you and Deanne will be more comfortable there."

"No problem." Then he whispered, "I get it. I'll keep her busy."

Ethan waited until everyone had helped themselves to the food before getting back to the subject.

"First things first," he continued, "Jen, I'd like to lock both you and Deanne away in a closet until this is over, but I'm afraid we can't do it without you."

"What do you mean?"

"What he means," Dino interrupted, "is that no one's going to be a better resource than you. You know John's habits, the people he worked with, impressions of them. A lot of little things that might add up when we put them down on paper. I'm taking point on this. Ethan's already told you that. So you and I will have to work as a team."

He pushed down the fingers of anticipation that teased at him. How would she react to the next piece of news?

"So what I'm going to do," Ethan picked up the thread smoothly, "is send you back to Key West with Dino. That's his operating base. No one will think to look for you there, you can work with him in relative security, and it separates you from Deanne."

Jen paused in the act of carrying a forkful of food to her mouth. "What about Deanne?"

"She stays here." He held up his hand as Jen glared at him. "She'll be a lot safer here. This place has electronic and human guards twenty-four/seven. No one can get to her

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here, pull her away from you and use her against you. And whoever's on your tail will be looking for a woman and a small child. Separating the two of you takes that out of the equation. You've got to take an active role in this and it can't be from here."

"You're trying to get rid of us," she accused him. "Or maybe take Deanne away from me by putting her beyond my reach?"

"Damn it—" Ethan started.

Lisa put a hand on his arm and looked at Jen. "That wouldn't even cross his mind. I know how you feel about being separated. Believe me. But Ethan gave this a lot of thought last night and we discussed all the angles before he called Dino. This is the best way to protect both of you."

Jen shifted her emerald gaze to Dino. Once more he felt that punch to the gut, and this time he saw an answering spark, one that she quickly extinguished. But a stray grin teased at her mouth.

"So does this mean that you're in charge of me?" she asked him.

Dino cleared his throat. "What Ethan says makes sense. Besides, like he pointed out, Deanne will be safer here than the president with all the security around her."

And I'm really looking forward to taking you home with me and wiping away that look of desperation in your eyes.

Lisa turned to Jen who was stirring her coffee as if her life depended on it. "I'm guessing one other reason you brought Deanne here was to give her a chance to know her father. This is the best way to do that. I don't know you but I do

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know Ethan. If he thinks this is the right thing to do, then it is. Dino will keep you safe and Deanne will be fine here."

"But—"

"No buts," Ethan told her. "Dino just told you he's going to be doing the heavy lifting on this. He has contacts he can reach out to, things he can do. You've probably got information stored in your brain that you don't even realize might be important."

Dino drained his coffee and wiped his mouth carefully on his napkin. "Jen. Listen. This is how it is. I run a charter service out of Key West. I set my own schedule. No one expects me to be anywhere on a regular basis and they're used to me disappearing for days at a time, if that's what this calls for. Nobody asks questions about my life. So there won't be any red flags raised to draw anyone's attention to you being with me or what we're doing."

Usually.

"I live in what the tourist people like to call a Key West cottage," he went on. "Nothing fancy but it's clean and near the water. I have two bedrooms and I think you'll be very comfortable there. And secure."

"What kind of charters?" she wanted to know.

"Some fishing, some ... others. But I won't be taking on anything else until we get this squared away, and I'm in position to keep you off the radar."

"I trusted Ethan with my life and Jamie's," Lisa told Jen. "It was the smartest decision I ever made. I know you don't like being separated from Deanne, but you need to think of what's best for her, too."

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Jen gave Ethan a hard look. "You aren't thinking of trying to pull any funny stuff here, are you?"

Dino saw the muscle jump in Ethan's cheek and his eyes narrow, the only visible signs that he was fighting to maintain control. Unlike Jen, he noted.

"I have no intention of cutting you off from her," he said in a tight voice. "That would be selfish, foolish, and not very smart. I think you know me better than that. So drop it."

"Well." Mike took a swallow of coffee and set his mug down. He'd said nothing up until now. "Okay, then. Let's talk details."

For the next hour they discussed their plan of operation and how Dino would coordinate everything. Ethan had a contact in the Detroit area he wanted to reach out to so they put that on this list.

Lisa checked twice on Jamie and Deanne, coming back to report that somehow he had coaxed the little girl into eating her breakfast and trying his video game.

"When I peeked in just now they were so engrossed in the computer they didn't even know I was there," she reported.

Jen flashed a brief smile. "Thank you."

They'd gone through two pots of coffee before the men were finally satisfied enough to call a halt to the meeting.

"Thank goodness." Lisa began clearing the mugs away. "Ethan, everyone needs a break here. Jen looks exhausted."

"Better exhausted than dead," he pointed out, "but you're right. I think I've got what I need for now." He glanced at Jen. "How do you want to handle telling Deanne what the plans are?"

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She tucked her hair behind her ears, fiddling with the loose strands. "I think I should talk to her alone. Then it's up to you and Lisa to make her comfortable with this."

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Chapter Four

In the end they managed the separation without too much trauma, but Jen realized much of the credit went to Lisa. Jen was sitting on Jamie's bed, rocking Deanne in her lap while the little girl sobbed silently into her shoulder, body stuck to her as if with Velcro, when Lisa walked in.

"I just came to check on things. Dino's anxious to get going."

"Dino can be anxious all he wants," Jen snapped, then bit back the rest of her anger. "I'm sorry. I'm just not leaving with my daughter in hysterics."

Lisa sat down beside them and began stroking Deanne's arm, speaking to her in a low, soothing voice.

"You know, sweetheart, it's very important for your mommy to help find the people who want to hurt you and who hurt your daddy. You want that, don't you?"

Deanne sniffled and nodded, still clutching Jen's blouse.

"Well, they have to go someplace else to do it, someplace where the bad people won't find you."

"But why can't I go, too?" Deanne sobbed. "I won't be any trouble. I'll be quiet as a mouse. I promise."

"It isn't that. Your mommy can't do what she has to if she thinks you're in danger. And this is the only safe place for you to stay."

Lisa went on in that soft voice of hers, talking about security in terms a child Deanne's age could understand, and

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how it would help Jen if she could do what she had to do without having to worry.

Ethan came to the door twice but Lisa just waved him away and kept talking. At last Deanne sat up, rubbed her cheeks with the back of her hand, and hugged her mother. "Will you call me every day?"

"I absolutely promise. And these people will take good care of you. It will be fine, sweetie. I promise. And I've never lied to you yet, have I?"

Except for one very big lie about your parentage.

Deanne shook her head.

"Okay, then." She set her daughter on her feet. "I've got to go now. Why don't you and Jamie start a new game and you won't even realize when I leave?"

"Kids are much more resilient than you think," Lisa commented as they headed out the back door. "And Jamie's been through his own crisis, so he can be a big help."

Jen studied Lisa's face, then swallowed the last of her objections. "I know I sounded ungrateful before but I really do appreciate this."

"She'll be fine with us. Ethan will set up a schedule for her to call you regularly, using the secure satellite phones. I'll make sure she does it."

"Time to get going, Jen." Dino picked up the suitcase. At the chopper he passed it to Mike to stow, then handed Jen into the cabin. "We'll get it done, Ethan. You know that."

"Thanks. Again." The men shook hands.

"After I get Jen settled in I'll start putting out feelers. I'll check in with you tonight and let you know how far I get."

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Mike cranked the engine and Ethan backed away from the rotor backwash. He waited until they lifted off before heading back to the house.

While the rotors were warming up, Dino handed Jen a pair of earphones and adjusted them for her.

"This way you can hear everything we say and everything that comes in over the radio."

"Can other people hear us?"

Dino shook his head. "Not unless Mike turns to their frequency. The only time you need to be quiet is when he talks to the tower for takeoff clearance."

She listened as Mike contacted the nearest airport, filed his flight plan, and requested takeoff from his location.

* * * *

Once they were airborne, Jen tapped Dino on the shoulder.

"What do you think Ethan is doing right now? Is he waiting until you call him from Key West?"

Dino grinned. "Ethan waits for no man. He's probably on the horn with our Detroit man right this minute."

Just then the satellite phone buzzed and he pulled off his headphones to answer the call.

"Yeah?"

"Me." Ethan's gravelly voice. "I called Smiley as soon as you took off."

Jack Smiley was someone they'd both worked with a long time ago. Dino still contacted him now and then and would have called himself if Ethan hadn't beaten him to the punch.

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"What's the deal?" From the corner of his eyes he saw Jen shift her headphones so she had one ear free to listen. Well, it was certainly her life and Deanne's involved. He'd be telling her about this later, anyway.

"I think I shocked him." Ethan chuckled. "He told me he thought I was dead."

"I think a lot of people shared that thought," Dino pointed out. "Good thing you kept in touch with me or I would have been Googling your funeral notice."

"I told him if a lot of people had their way, I would be."

"How's everything in Michigan? Did you tell him what you wanted?"

Jen was now leaning slightly forward between the seats. Dino shifted his gaze to her and held up one finger.

"Yeah, and got more than I bargained for."

Dino kept his face carefully blank. "Oh, yeah?"

"Funny coincidence. According to Jack this thing has been all over the media there the last couple of days. It seems Sutherland's disappearance is big news, him being the director of a very high profile museum and all."

"What about..." Dino glanced at Jen "...anyone else?"

"The media's been running pictures of them, too. They seem to think the whole family's just up and fallen off the radar and no one knows why." Ethan paused a moment. "Smiley also said just in passing conversation he's heard there are feelers out for Jen and Deanne, too."

"Ouch. Jack Smiley's never had just a 'passing conversation' with anyone in his life. That means the ground he keeps his ear to is shaking about this."

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"You got that right. And something else."

"Yeah?"

"The president of the museum board made a big deal out of Sutherland not showing up for work and sent the cops to check out the house when they couldn't rouse anybody. Maybe for real, maybe for show."

An itchy feeling crawled up Dino's neck. "Did they find anything?" But even as he asked the question, he knew the answer.

"Smiley said his cop friend told him it looked like a bunch of vandals had gone through it. The place was all torn up. Furniture smashed. And no sign of what happened to the wife and kid."

"Did you tell him why you were calling him? I mean, the whole skinny?"

"Yeah. It wouldn't do to keep him in the dark. He'd find out soon enough anyway. And if we don't give him the information he needs, he can't do what we want him to do."

"So what did he say?"

"Something very profound. *Holy shit.*" Ethan gave a rusty chuckle. "But he's on the case. I told him to send me a bill for his time and expenses."

Dino knew, however, there would be no bill forthcoming. They all remembered a time in Thailand on an extremely black mission that had gone wrong. Smiley had about got his ass shot off and Ethan had dragged him out of the line of fire. He'd done the same for the other two men who'd been dropped from the helo with them, even though he'd been shot himself.

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"All right. I'll touch base with him after we're settled in the Keys." He disconnected the call, turned and hunched his shoulders to make another call.

The call was to a number he hadn't dialed in so many years he wasn't even sure it still worked but it was his only place to start. The voice that answered was hard and uninflected.

"You must have the wrong number."

"If you're reading from the caller ID you'd think so," Dino replied. "I want to speak to Martin Van Dine."

"You must have the wrong number," the voice repeated. "There's no such person here."

"Well, if you should happen to talk to him, please tell him Dino Brancuzzi would like to hear from him at this number."

"I wouldn't sit around and wait for it," the voice said before it clicked off.

Dino shoved a hand through his hair and resettled his headphones. He only had a ten percent chance Van Dine would return the call. He didn't even know if the man was still alive.

Years ago he'd had to make a choice on a mission. His orders were to take out two men running a lot of money to insurgent groups in African countries. Trapped in a difficult circumstance, he'd had to let one go in order to take out the other. He'd chosen to let Van Dine make his escape. The way he looked at it, the man owed him. If anyone could dig into the black side of the antiques market, Van Dine would be the one.

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Jen watched Dino carefully through both telephone calls, trying to decipher what was happening from his cryptic words. He turned his head and smiled at her, a knowing look in his eyes.

"When we get to the house," he told her, "I'll answer your questions. Deanne's safe, so be patient. Please."

Anger and helplessness swirled inside her, leaving her shaken and weak. She wanted to be with Deanne, to make sure her daughter felt secure and safe. Jen had shielded her from most of the horror in that cabin, but the whole experience had to be nothing less than traumatic for her. She'd barely said a word on the long road trip. Even her tears were silent. Keeping everything bottled inside her could cause bigger problems down the line.

But Lisa Caine had promised Deanne would be fine, and she had a way of making you believe her. That woman had certainly been a surprise. No, make that shock. Not at all the type of woman to make Ethan settle down. And who the hell had ever thought Ethan would turn out to be a family man, anyway?

The last time she'd seen him, eight years ago, he'd been bleary-eyed and hung over, wearing a week's growth of beard and hair longer than hers. One last wild night of monkey sex and then he was gone again. She hadn't even known if he'd remember her, a sobering thought that also hurt. But desperate times called for desperate measures, and she hadn't been above using Deanne, her ace in the hole, to coerce him.

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So now here she was, about to set up housekeeping with Dino Brancuzzi in Key West. Oh, she could certainly see the point of the whole thing. It was important to have someone involved in the process who could provide them with information, no matter how little. And she was the only one who fit that description.

Years ago when they'd all been hanging out together, Ethan had been larger than life, even at his worst, imprinting his personality on everyone and everything. Dino had been someone on the sidelines, quiet, watchful. Yet he was always the man Ethan counted on in risky situations. Age had only made him better looking, and what was with the electricity that seemed to flow between them every time they touched? Her marriage to John Sutherland had ended up being almost platonic, so sex hadn't even been a word in her vocabulary for longer than she cared to think. Now just a look from Dino, a light touch of his hand, and her body began to remember things she thought she'd forgotten. How was she supposed to handle *that*?

She jumped when he reached back and tapped her arm and pointed toward the windshield.

"We're landing," he said through the comm system.

Her eyes widened. "On the water?" Below her she could see the Atlantic Ocean and a strip of land that jutted out into it from the road that circled Key West.

Dino chuckled. "No, on that gravel parking lot. That's my shop. Blackwater Charters. And that pier stretching out holds the slips that I rent out to people for their boats."

"Where's your boat?" she asked.

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He pointed to the slip at the end of the long pier, beyond a small, somewhat ramshackle office. Jen didn't know much about boats but she knew this one was huge and expensive. Even at this distance she could see it riding high above the water, big chairs at the bow that she assumed were for fishing, and an elevated superstructure, or whatever it was called. However he really made his money, Dina Brancuzzi obviously did all right for himself.

Mike settled the chopper easily on its skids, Dino pushed open the door and jumped out, then reached a hand up to help Jen. She wanted to smack him for being so gracious when she was in such an ugly mood, but it wasn't his fault she was in this jackpot.

"Duck low," he shouted, pulling her away from the wash of the rotors.

When he had her a sufficient distance away, he hunched close to the copter again to retrieve her suitcase, then slammed the cabin door. He and Mike waved at each other and the bird lifted off, spraying fine gravel beneath the skids.

Dino turned to Jen and flashed a smile. "Well. Want the cook's tour or would you like to get settled first?"

"Settled," she snorted. "Is that a euphemism for locked up?"

He took one of her hands in his, tightening his hold on it when she would have pulled it away. His eyes were serious.

"We can make this easy or hard, Jen. Me, I vote for easy, but I know you have issues. So why don't we go to my place, we'll crack open a couple of beers and you can get it all out of your system."

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She wondered how you stayed mad at a guy like this. Charming but not oily. Warm and sincere but not suffocating. And holy hell, even easier on the eyes than she remembered. The dark hair had a little grey salted through it. On some men his age, the ponytail might have given them the ancient hippie look, especially with the gold stud winking in one ear. But on Dino Brancuzzi it was masculine and sexy. The soft jeans and the black T-shirt with Blackwater Charters across the front fit him like a second skin.

But it was his eyes that got her, dark chocolate with tiny flecks of gold, and the thickest lashes she'd ever seen on a man. And still clear and sharp as ever. When he smiled, his white teeth flashed and a tiny dimple winked at the left corner of his chiseled mouth. Along with the beard stubble he'd always been fighting that shadowed the warm, olive complexion, the whole image was one of a wicked adventurer.

But the touch of his hand on hers was the first contact that let her draw a full breath since the nightmare at the cabin.

Just as she thought. She was in big trouble here and not from some unknown killers.

Dino gave her hand a gentle squeeze. "I didn't think that was such a hard question, Jen."

"What?" She shook herself. Had he caught her taking visual inventory of him?

"Home? Beer? Conversation?" He grinned. "I vote yes, so let's go."

He tugged at her and she followed along without protest to a black SUV parked at one side of the lot. Dino tossed her

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suitcase in the back, settled them in the front seats, and cranked the engine.

Jen pulled her sunglasses out of her purse, shielding her eyes from the blazing Key West sun. "Everything looks so ... white," she commented.

Dino chuckled. "I think the chamber of commerce decrees it that way. You might want to get a pair of wraparound glasses, especially for when we go out on the water."

"The water?" She turned to glance at him.

"Honey, I'm on the water every day, even when I'm not working. It's where my head hangs out." His expression sobered. "It's also the best place to use the satellite phone. It's exactly what its name implies—a phone that gets its signals from a satellite rather than a cell tower. The system I use is what's called low earth orbit or LEO. It can give me worldwide coverage without any gaps in reception. And every phone I use as well as those of the people I connect with has a scrambler on it."

"So people can't intercept your conversation," she guessed.

"You got it. That means I can make whatever calls I need to on this project without worrying who's listening in."

She cocked her head at him. "I don't remember you saying exactly what it is you do these days."

He grinned. "I'm sure I told you. I run a charter boat service."

"Oh. Yeah. Right. Charter service."

She was silent after that until they pulled into the driveway next to his cottage. To Jen it looked exactly how she expected

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a Key West cottage to look: right on the sidewalk with only three steps up to a wide porch, the kind her grandparents called a verandah. Two rockers sat invitingly to one side of the front door. The cottage was painted a dazzling white, the shutters and doors a soft blue. Jen wondered who had chosen the colors or if Dino did it himself.

Dino led the way up the steps to the porch, unlocked the front door, and swung it open for her to enter.

"*Mi casa es su casa*, Miss LaCroix." He waved her inside.

"Jen will do," she told him, following him into the house. "We're not exactly strangers, you know."

His gaze held hers for a brief moment. "No," he said in a soft voice. "We're not, are we?"

Jen looked around at where she'd be staying for who knew how long. The bungalow was small but scrupulously clean. The walls were a cool cream color and the floors terra cotta tiles. Surprisingly there were plants everywhere, potted cactus mostly, but a huge schefflera sat in one corner, and an asparagus fern hung in front of one window.

"I didn't figure you for a horticulturist," she joked, running her fingers over the soft leaves of the fern.

"I like to care for living things," he said in a strange voice. "It keeps me centered.

Did that mean he dealt with death a lot? Jen shuddered involuntarily and turned her gaze on the art hanging on the walls.

Dino noticed where she was looking. "Local talent. I like to patronize the art shows."

"I like it. It's..." she searched for a word, "...vivid."

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"Ah. A good word for Key West."

The kitchen and the living room formed one big area, with a short hall breaking off at a right angle. Dino carried her suitcases through one of the doors. "It's small but clean. And the bed has an excellent mattress."

"At least you took care of the most important thing." She glanced around the small room. "Dino, I'm sorry to have to impose on you this way, but Ethan didn't leave either of us much choice."

"No problem, honey. We'll get along just fine. Why don't you put your stuff away and meet me out on the porch. I'll get those beers."

Unpacking took too few minutes. John had stuffed the bare essentials in her suitcase and that was it. She hoped Dino had a washer and dryer, or she'd have to spend some of the precious money John had left with her. She was hoarding it carefully, with no idea how long it would have to last.

She stretched her arms and took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. What kind of man was Dino Brancuzzi really? What was his story? Every man Ethan had run with had a strange tale to tell and she'd never paid much attention to any of them. She wondered at the easy way Dino accepted this arrangement, giving her his protection by sheltering her in his home. Did he do this often? Was there some woman in Dino's life right now who might resent her presence? She was sure not every female on the planet was as gracious as Lisa Caine.

But then, not every man looked at his wife with so much love in his eyes you had to turn away at the intimacy of it.

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God, would she ever find that for herself, or had she missed the brass ring altogether?

Dino was waiting where he said he'd be, his finely honed senses causing him to turn his head even before she opened the door to the porch. A bottle of beer was cradled in one hand, another sat on a little table between the rockers, along with a plate of lime wedges. He held out a bottle to her.

"Hope you like this kind."

"If it's cold, it's my brand." She sat in the other rocker, tilted the bottle up to her lips and took a long drink.

"Lime?" He pointed to the plate.

She shook her head. "Not a habit I've ever cultivated."

"No? You should try it. It's a Key West favorite. Come on. Just like this." He squeezed a wedge around the neck of the bottle, then tilted the bottle back and took a long swallow.

"Try it. It's good for the soul."

"Well..." She eyed the limes skeptically, then took one, imitated his movements and took a sip of her own drink. Her eyes widened in surprise. "It actually tastes good! Even enhances the flavor of the beer."

"See?" He winked at her. "Stick with me, kid. Your life will improve before you know it."

Every trace of pleasure left her face. "It certainly can't get any worse, can it?"

Dino rubbed the lime on the mouth of his bottle again, his eyes never leaving his simple task as he spoke. "Okay, you have the floor. Out with it. Get everything out of your system and then we can go on from there."

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"Okay." She took another swallow, just to calm herself. "Besides being scared half out of my mind, I miss my daughter like crazy. And I'm pissed that I'm in this situation to begin with, thanks to the jerk head I married. If it weren't for bad luck, I'd have no luck at all."

* * * *

Once again Dino studied the woman sitting near him. Again he was reminded of the contrast between the high-living Jen LaCroix he'd known so long ago and this half-frightened, half-angry woman. How the hell could someone whose life appeared to have been written in the pages of a magazine have fallen down this particular rabbit hole?

He listened carefully while she got it all out. Her disappointment in her marriage. Her rage at John for getting them in this situation. For turning her life upside down. And the fear, not for herself, but for her daughter.

She was silent for a long time after she finished talking. When Dino didn't make any comment, she said, "Aren't you going to ask me about Deanne?"

He shook his head, tipped the bottle up to his lips and drank. "You want to tell me, my ears are open. Otherwise it's none of my business."

"What *is* your business, Dino?"

"Making sure you're safe and helping Ethan find out who's behind all this so you can take your life back."

Jen folded her legs under her and twisted the bottle on her thigh, eyes focused on the wet circle she was making. "So,

just exactly how do you expect to do that? And what's my contribution supposed to be?"

"Glad you asked." He pushed himself out of the rocker. "Come on inside and I'll fire up the laptop. Show you where we'll begin. Then I'll start asking questions again. So many questions, in fact, you'll probably want to kick me before it's over. Or tell me to shut up."

"Not if it resolves this situation. Also, you said you'd tell me about those two calls on the helicopter."

"Inside," he repeated.

But as they walked into the living room the sat phone hooked to Dino's belt chirped at them.

"Yeah?" Jen saw his eyes narrow as he listened to what Ethan was saying, although he kept the rest of his face wiped clean of all expression. "Uh huh. Yeah. Okay. Got you covered. Yeah, I'm going to tell her now."

"Tell me what?" Jen was facing him, arms on her hips, her face taut with tension. "And don't give me any bullshit that it's nothing to do with me. You do the same thing with your eyes Ethan does when he wants to hide something."

Dino burst out laughing. "You mean we have a 'tell'? God, that sure can cut your legs out from under you in our business." Then he sobered. "I've got some disturbing news for you, Jen, and I don't want you to freak out."

In a calm voice, he related what Ethan had said on the earlier call. What was happening in Detroit, the search for John and the break-in at her house. To her credit, Jen kept herself from freaking out, but she dropped onto the couch, gripping her shaking hands together.

"He just wanted to make sure I let you know about it. Normally there'd be an insurance company to notify, adjusters to meet with. You know the kind of stuff. But since you can't stick your head out of the ground, all that will have to wait. Anyway, the police have the house sealed off as a crime scene and have stationed someone to keep watch on it for the moment."

"Someone will find his body soon," Jen said. "Someone has to know about that place. I mean, it's got to be on the tax rolls or something, right? His body won't just rot away there forever."

"I have no idea, Jen. You said yourself you didn't even know about it. Maybe he borrowed it from someone." He tossed the empty bottles in the trash. "Do you have any idea who that might be?"

She shrugged. "No. I just know he said we had to get out of town and he thought we'd be safe there."

Dino took his laptop from the counter, sat at the table with it and booted it up. "Okay. Let's start again here. Tell me everything you can remember about that place. How long it took to get there. The closest town. Anything at all."

"But—"

"Jen, they killed John without blinking an eye. They trashed your house. There's a good possibility that whoever let John use the cabin is the one who told these guys where to find him. We have to start somewhere. Now come on. Let's get started."

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Chapter Five

Jack Smiley sat across from Roger Wellborn, Chairman of the Board of the Tate Museum, and wondered if the man would ever give him a straight answer.

"I really need to know what you can tell me about Sutherland's background," he said, not for the first time. "All I have is the information from his file when he applied for the position here. That was fourteen years ago, nothing's been added since then, and to tell the truth, Mr. Wellborn, it doesn't give much except his educational background."

Wellborn folded his hands on his immaculate desk blotter. "We checked his references and he came highly recommended. That was all we needed."

"About those references." Smiley pulled a small battered notebook from his jacket pocket. "They didn't seem to be listed in the file, either. I thought maybe you might remember who they were, seeing as how you were heading the interview committee back then."

Wellborn gave him a wintry smile. "I'm sure even you can't remember information from that long ago."

"You'd be amazed at what I remember. The point is, there doesn't seem to be a place to start here. No one can even tell me who their friends were. People don't live in a community all this time and not have a single friend." He narrowed his eyes slightly. "Do they?"

"Mr. Smiley," Wellborn leaned back in his chair, "the board is very pleased with way John Sutherland has run this

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museum. He raised a lot of money and brought us some outstanding exhibits. He never lacked for contacts, and that's all that's important to me and to the other members of the board."

Smiley tapped his pen on the notebook, then put them away and stood up. "Well, then. I guess we're done for the day."

"I have no idea why you're even sticking your nose in this," Wellborn called after him. "I'm sure the police will do an excellent job."

As long as they're allowed to, Smiley thought to himself. His visit to the police station and his chat with the detectives looking into the case had given him the very unpleasant feeling that someone didn't want John Sutherland's disappearance looked at too closely. And wasn't it strange that no one had even found the body yet?

* * * *

The dark-haired man in the blazer and jeans occupied himself with the lobby receptionist while Smiley strode from the elevator and headed down the corridor toward the building's garage. He watched from the corner of his eye until Smiley disappeared through the door, then winked at the receptionist and exited the building. On the sidewalk, he pulled his cell phone from its belt holster and punched in a number.

"He spent about thirty minutes with Wellborn," he told the voice that answered. "I seriously doubt he got anything from him but I'll check."

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"What I want to know," the voice told him, "is why he's on the case at all and just who the hell he is."

"I'm checking into that right now."

"Maybe it's the wife," the voice suggested. "If so, he could be a lead to her."

"Jennifer Sutherland doesn't have the money or the contacts to hire anyone," the man disagreed. "Besides, it would mean coming out from wherever she and the kid are hiding and she wouldn't chance it."

"You might try looking into her past while you're at it. Maybe there's someone there we don't know about."

"I'm on it."

"And you know what to do if Smiley makes a pest of himself."

"Already taking care of that, too. I won't wait until it gets to that point. Too dangerous. And don't worry," he added over the objections coming through the line. "No one will question it."

"Just see that they don't. Our mission is to find those missing pieces, not spend any more time talking to the police."

"I'm handling it." The man clicked the phone shut and shoved it back in his holster. He hoped he wasn't being overly optimistic.

* * * *

Smiley was pissed. He'd pulled a list of the museum's board members off the Internet as soon as Ethan had called and set about knocking each one down. He'd gotten in to see

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everyone by posing as a representative of the family—not too far from wrong—up to and including the chairman, who'd been elusive and unreachable until this afternoon. Everyone he'd met with was charmingly polite but had no information to give him at all.

Yeah, right.

He'd only been on this case since this morning, and already the thing smelled like last week's fish.

It was impossible for someone to be as much of a cipher as John Sutherland seemed to be. Smiley had Googled him and gotten nothing but the information in his museum file and the clippings from newspapers that covered museum events. Even the national organizations had nothing but his name, his degrees, and his current place of employment.

Damn it. The man had to be born somewhere. He wasn't hatched and delivered full grown. At the end of the day he had almost nothing to show for his efforts. All it meant to Smiley was he hadn't looked in the right places. As soon as he got home he would touch base with Ethan and run through their contacts to see who to tap into.

Tomorrow he needed to begin a series of friendly little chats with the Sutherlands' neighbors. Surely some of them had kids Deanne's age. They would have played together. Maybe the parents socialized. Somebody had to know something.

The sat phone on the seat beside him buzzed as he left the interstate north of the city and headed out to a more sparsely populated area where he lived. Like Ethan, the fewer neighbors he had to deal with, the better.

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"What's the deal?" Ethan growled in his ear.

"The deal is something is very wrong," Smiley told him. "John Sutherland doesn't seem to exist before fifteen years ago, and no one knows or cares anything about that. He popped out of an egg full grown and lived in a vacuum except when he was at work."

"Jesus, Jack. He got married, he has a child. There have to be records somewhere."

"Marriage license. No surprises there. Birth certificate. I've got the doctor's name and he's on my list for tomorrow." He turned onto the side road that led to his house, one that wound around the hill it was perched on. "I'm also going to ... shit! Holy Jesus!"

There was no sound, no warning. His rear tire on the outside blew and the car began to skid. He dropped the phone on the seat and fought the wheel with both hands. The hill had a sheer drop off on the outside and the car kept dragging toward it. Sweat poured down his back and made his hands slick on the wheel. With strength he didn't even know he had, he finally wrestled the car to a stop at the beginning of another turn, against a tall, overhanging tree.

"Jack? You there, Jack?" Ethan's voice crackled from the phone. "What the hell's going on?"

Smiley forced himself to draw deep breaths and calm his heartbeat that was thundering out of control. He picked up the phone, Ethan's voice still shouting from it.

"I'm here." He rubbed his hand over his face, feeling the sweat on his forehead.

"What the hell happened?"

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"Well, if I was your average Joe, I'd say my rear tire just blew. But I'm hardly average, I just bought new tires, and the so-called blowout happened right at a dangerous curve." He blew out a breath. "I'd say somebody shot the tire out, hoping I'd go over the side."

"Holy Jesus!" Ethan's voice betrayed his controlled anger. "Jack, close up the file and send it to me. This isn't worth risking your safety."

"Hell, no," Smiley roared. "These guys are really pissing me off. And anyway, when was the last time I let someone scare me off?"

"I'm telling you—"

"And I'm telling *you* there's no way you're calling me off. Let me get home and pull myself together and I'll call you back later." He gave a short laugh. "Good thing they didn't know I bought those self-sealing tires."

He clicked off the call then dialed another number.

"Me," he rumbled into the phone. "Got a little problem and I need you to meet me and cover my ass."

After giving his location, he disconnected. He wasn't about to get out and make sure the tire was resealed until he had someone covering his back. Jumbled thoughts ran through his mind like a video scanner as he mentally ran back the people he'd talked to during the past two days, trying to find some stingy little clue that would tell him who might have hired the shooter.

He racked the slide on his H&K P2000 handgun, put it on the seat next to him, and sat back to wait for his friend.

* * * *

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"That's how you keep in touch with people?" Jen asked, watching the laptop screen. "On a secure network?"

"And how I do my research." He made a few clicks with the mouse and brought up a new list of web sites. "See? Here's even more places to check out antiquities and what's happening with them."

"Sooooo, if I tried to find these on my computer could I do it?"

"If you had the password." He blanked the screen. "Enough for now. I've got feelers out about both the cabin and recent traffic in antiquities, and I need to wait for people to get back to me."

Jen sipped on her second bottle of beer and narrowed her eyes at Dino. "So how did you end up in Key West living like this and obviously making tons of money?"

Dino closed out a search he'd been doing on the laptop and picked up his own beer. "I was here and the opportunity presented itself."

She laughed. "And if you told me any more you'd have to kill me."

He enjoyed seeing her laugh. He didn't think she'd done much of that for a long time. The corners of his mouth turned up in a slow smile. "Something like that." He leaned back and crossed his legs, the ankle of one resting on the knee of the other. "Actually once I was out of the military, I found civilian life not too exciting. I have no family to speak of, no ties. And I guess you could say I'm an adrenaline junkie. I wanted to get into the mix again, somehow."

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"And something just fell in your lap?"

"In a way." He fiddled with the pencil lying on the table. "While I was trying to figure out what to do next, I bought a boat to do some deep sea fishing. About a month later two stranded tourists said they'd pay double the fee if I'd take them out, so I was in business. Then one day a guy came up to me, told me he was sent by an old friend and he'd like to charter me for two days."

"But not for fishing." Jen watched him closely.

"Well, we did catch some fish," Dino joked. "But I want to know about you. It's been a long time since we last saw each other. You seem ... different."

"I hope that's a good different."

"I see pain in your eyes, Jen. And a hopelessness that was never there.

She shrugged. "Times change. What's to know about me? I can't think of anything I haven't told you. You know what kind of life I was leading when I was hanging out with Ethan. But when I found out I was pregnant, I had to make some major changes."

"Did you already know your husband?"

Jen began to methodically peel the label from the bottle. "Yes. Sort of. I had some money put aside but I still needed a job. The money wouldn't last forever and I wanted a stable situation before the baby came. I had worked before doing computer graphics, so I took some classes to brush up and hung out my cyber-shingle. Someone on the museum board saw a piece I did for a friend of hers and recommended me. They needed some brochures for upcoming exhibits and one

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for general fund solicitation. I spent a lot of time with John when we were putting them together."

Dino rubbed the neck of his bottle with his thumb. "Don't take this wrong, Jen, but it doesn't seem like it took you long to land him."

"No, and I won't make excuses for it." She set the bottle on the table, stood up and walked to the front window. "The board was pressuring John to get married. They liked the idea of the director as a family man. I wanted a father for my child and he seemed to have all the right qualities. I set out to be the one he chose." She turned abruptly, her body stiff. "And I want to tell you, I was a damn good wife."

Dino held up his hands, palms outward. "Hey. I don't think otherwise. I was just trying to get a feel for how you ended up in this situation."

"I thought that would be my last ride on the merry-go-round. That I'd finally caught the brass ring." Her mouth twisted in a sardonic grin. "Shows you how much I know."

He opened his mouth to ask her something else, but at that moment his phone rang. He picked up the instrument, his gaze still fixed on Jen.

"Yeah?" He looked at Jen and mouthed "Ethan," then sat up abruptly at Ethan's message. "Damn. You're kidding." He listened again. "Okay. I'm on it. Take care, you hear?"

He studied Jen as he clicked off the phone.

She shifted under his scrutiny and panic flared briefly in her heart. "Something wrong?"

"Yeah. You might say that."

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Her breath caught. "Is it Deanne? Has something happened to her?"

"No, she's fine. I'm sorry. I should have realized that would be the first thing you'd think of. No. It's something else." He drummed his fingers on the table, eyes hooded as if sorting thoughts in his mind and finally stood up. "Come on. It's dinner time. I'll give you a wild ride through Key West. After that we're going to have dinner and more conversation."

He set the security alarm, locked the door and led her around to the side of the house. When he pulled a scooter out of the shed in the back, Jen frowned at him and took two steps back. "Listen, Dino. I don't think—"

"Right. Don't think. Just hop on. This is the quickest way to travel here."

She looked at the bulge that his flowered shirt barely concealed. "Do you always wear that gun?"

"Better to be safe than sorry. Come on. Let's go."

She climbed on behind him and wrapped her arms around him for security, noticing a slight wince when she jostled his arms and the way his right one jerked involuntarily.

"Am I holding too tight?"

"No. It's nothing."

But she lifted the elbow-length sleeve of the arm in question and sucked in her breath when she saw the thick bandage taped in place.

"You're hurt," she cried. "What happened? Why didn't you tell someone? God, Dino. Let's go back in the house so you can lie down."

He chuckled. "It's just a nick, Jen. It's already healing."

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She climbed off the bike and stood beside him, staring. "I've seen scars like that before. You were *shot*."

"I told you, it's nothing. Now climb on so we can get going." When she didn't move, he added, "I mean it, Jen. If it were serious, I promise I'd let you know. Now come on. We're wasting time."

Biting her lip, she climbed back on behind him, taking a little more care in the way she held him this time. He cranked the engine and roared off. She was glad she had fixed her ponytail or the wind whipping against her would have plastered her hair all over her face. She was only peripherally aware of the kaleidoscope of people they zipped past, for the most part keeping her eyes closed.

But overriding everything, including the feel of the gun at the small of his back, was the feel of Dino Brancuzzi's hard, muscular body pressed against her. Her breasts were crushed against the warmth of his back and she was shocked at the sensation the contact brought. She and John had had what she called a chaste sex life. His needs and demands were few and over the years she'd sublimated most of her own desires in the absence of satisfaction. Now they all came roaring back to life, waking up every nerve and pulse in her body.

Well, hell.

She was still trying to wipe both the ride and her reaction to this man from her mind when Dino turned a sharp left, slowed down, and finally stopped.

"We're here," he chuckled. "You can breathe now."

Jen opened her eyes and peered over Dino's shoulder. He'd pulled into the small parking lot of a restaurant,

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although that might have been too grand a name for it. Built on a pier of weathered barn wood, it looked as if it might fall down any minute.

"Are you sure this is safe?" She didn't know if she should get off the motor bike or not.

Dino laughed. "The look is all for show. Mostly locals come here. The tourists want places with more color. But this place will be here long after you and me, and the seafood's great. Come on. You can let go your death grip now."

Jen felt heat creep up her cheeks as she realized she was still plastered to Dino's body, her hands locked together against his chest. She was suddenly aware of how good this felt, her breasts pressed into the hard muscle of his back. For a moment, she didn't want to let go.

"Sorry."

She released her grip on him and peeled herself off the bike. When Dino turned to look at her, heat shimmered in his eyes, a hungry need that she hadn't seen or noticed before. Then, as if a switch had been thrown, it was gone.

"Let's get some dinner."

As if it was the most natural thing in the world, Dino took her hand and led her toward the restaurant.

He teased and joked while they ordered their food at a counter, then carried it outside to the far end of the pier, where no one was likely to interrupt them. But the smile didn't reach his eyes and Jen wondered what trouble Ethan had called him about.

She fidgeted with her plate and her glass, watching him from beneath lowered eyelids, while Dino arranged his own

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things on the table. Finally he took a sip of his iced tea, put the glass down, and looked at her.

"So would you like to tell me exactly who the hell John Sutherland is and why he has absolutely no personal history at all? And why the two of you apparently lived in a vacuum?"

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Chapter Six

The party at Roger Wellborn's McMansion, a fundraiser for the museum, was at full peak. Fifty elegantly attired and heavily jeweled guests sipped hundred-year-old champagne and nibbled on canapés while a string quartet played on the patio. The guest list included Mayor Henry Sobol of Detroit, Senator Wayne Mackall and his wife, Police Commissioner Louis McWilliams and his wife, high-powered criminal attorney Daniel Hayes, three bank presidents, plus Congressman Nathan Kressler—whose family owned half of Detroit and the outlying suburbs—and his wife, the only woman to head a private client department at a major financial institution. There were also two state representatives and three other state senators, some of whose wives ran thriving high-dollar businesses themselves. Many of these people sat on the museum board with him. The net worth of the gathering at the party could be counted in the billions.

Roger stood at the open French doors holding a crystal champagne flute, feeling marginally satisfied with himself. In the space of fifteen minutes he had put together a deal that would make his bank, his brother's land development company, and an old friend many more millions than they already had. Handshake deals always did it, he mused. Boardroom meetings were for mapping out details. Parties, country clubs and small lunches were for making the money itself.

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If only he could solve all the other problems dancing around the edges of his life as easily. The visitor to his office had set him on edge. This was all supposed to be so easy. Even cleaning up the loose ends hadn't looked to be a problem. So who the hell was looking into a nobody like John Sutherland? Did they have a clue as to what was going on? Jesus, he hoped not. They were already in dangerous waters.

As far as he knew, neither Sutherland nor his wife had any connections with people who would dig into the situation like this. And arranging to find out more had only made another mess to clean up.

Damn. Life was getting far too complicated.

He tossed back the champagne and plucked another glass from the tray of a passing waiter.

His gaze roamed the room constantly, checking to see who was talking to whom, who was moving through the crowds and who was stationary for too long a time. His eyes constantly returned to Mac, in deep conversation across the room with two women. The man always looked as if he'd achieved his situation in life with little more than charm or wit, but Wellborn knew that beneath the civility of the tuxedo, a lethal predator stalked every prey in its vicinity. He certainly had the power to destroy. He'd sucked Roger right into his trap before he even realized what was happening. The latest fiasco was only one more nail in his coffin.

Amazing what greed will do, he mused.

As if aware that eyes were on him, Mac looked up, shifted his gaze to Roger, and made a slight toasting gesture with his champagne flute.

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"Pretty full of yourself right now, aren't you?" a musical voice said at his elbow.

He turned his head to see Senator Wayne Mackall's wife, the powerful CEO of Advantage Techtronics, smiling up at him. The woman with the money and power behind her husband's political aspirations. The word was out that she was already designing her dress for the presidential inauguration. Roger knew that it was her finely honed business mind as well as her degrees from Stanford University and Wharton School of Business that made the business so successful. The same shrewd mind had crafted her husband's political career. Although most people said those hopes were really hers.

Roger wondered if anyone besides himself was aware that she and Mac had been conducting a quiet affair for more years than anyone would suspect. The two of them invented discretion. What would happen to squeaky clean Wayne Mackall if the news of this affair became public? Something for Roger to tuck away in case there came a time he needed it.

He'd had many dealings with her, every time he upgraded his company's electronics. But along with her business acumen, Mrs. Mackall had a streak of greed a mile wide. She was a shark, wringing every nickel out of a deal. Roger wondered if anything would ever satisfy it. In all his business dealings with her he made sure his mental armor was firmly in place.

"I'd say the museum did very well tonight," he said in a smooth voice.

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Her tinkling laugh sounded like crystal shattering. "I'd say so. The art of the deal, you know." She raised her glass to him. "And you're the master at it. Never let a chance go by, do you? I've watched you tonight. The museum was only the second thing on your mind."

"No more than you," he countered. "It's all about knowing how to pick everyone's pocket, philanthropically and for business, as you well know. What do they want that you can provide in exchange? What will it take to close the deal? The rules of the game, my dear."

"Just be sure you don't get too big for your britches, Roger. You never know who's watching you."

She took a healthy swallow of the champagne and Wellborn realized she was well on her way to being drunk. An oddity for the woman, whose control was legendary. She could give lessons on it to many men. Something was rattling her cage.

"Is there something you'd like to say to me? Something I'm missing here?"

She laughed again, the sound grating on his nerves. "I think you know perfectly well. Just don't overstep your bounds."

Her innuendos were hard to miss and Wellborn felt a bitter taste wash through his mouth. Another devil dancing on his head.

She moved away on legs only slightly unsteady. Moments later he saw her in deep conversation with Patricia Morgan, owner of Morgan's Gallery. Many people assumed Patricia's business had grown to its enormous size because of her

husband's money and influence. A man who owned all the sports venues in the area as well as one of the country's largest amphitheatres carried quite a bit of weight in the business world.

But her mind was just as finely honed as the Mackall woman's. She'd clawed her way to the top of the art world ladder and wasn't about to be dethroned.

Now there were two people who could cook up trouble in a hurry. Beauty on the outside, complete rot on the inside.

"Interesting specimens we play with, wouldn't you say?"

Wellborn turned to the grey-haired man who had moved up next to him so silently.

"I think it might be time to shut down the playpen," he muttered to him. "Both of them, in fact."

"Don't be too hasty, Roger."

"We never should have taken this last risk. It was beyond anything we'd done before. We were greedy."

The man chuckled. "A little greed is a good thing."

"We were doing fine with things the way they were, Henry. A steady supply. Nobody looking over our shoulders. A smooth operation."

"This is just a little bump in the road. It will be behind us soon enough."

"And how many more bodies will we litter that road with before then?" Roger wanted to know, trying to keep himself under control.

"Collateral damage," Henry said. "You can't afford exposure on this and God knows I certainly can't. Neither can the rest of us. So, we do what we have to do." He clapped

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Wellborn on the shoulder in what would appear to anyone watching a simple friendly gesture. But his hand squeezed hard. "Avarice and gluttony, Roger. Two of the seven deadly sins. They've got us firmly in their clutches."

He squeezed once more, then smiled and walked away.

Roger let his gaze travel over the room to the others, his playmates in the devil's playpen. Everyone one of them motivated by the same hunger and a need for possession. For one brief moment, he wished he could trade places with John Sutherland. At least dead men could rest.

* * * *

The table Dino chose was out on the deck, next to the railing. Not all of them were filled, but those that were had smiling and laughing occupants relaxing over good food and icy margaritas. The beach and the Gulf of Mexico stretched out beyond them, seagulls dipping and whirling and screeching their cry. Early evening fishermen stood on the jetty hoping for the last catch of the day. Along the waterline two boys ran, towing kites, doing their best not to tangle with each other.

Jen envied the people who had nothing more to worry about than enjoying the tropical ambience and each other. She wondered if she'd ever, ever get to that point in her life.

She pushed the cole slaw around on her plate, her appetite long gone. The questions and answers were all beginning to run together.

"For what I sincerely hope is the last time," she said in a tired voice, "I swear that's all I know."

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They'd been at it for an hour. Whatever the phone call had been about, it had cranked Dino into high gear. He had made her repeat the things she'd told Ethan the day before, the things she'd told him earlier, probing and digging for any kernel she might have forgotten.

"What's going on, Dino? You've wrung out my brain so many times it's completely inert. What was that phone call about?"

In short, brief sentences he told her about their friend, Jack Smiley, and what had happened to him. Her stomach rebelled and she was afraid the seafood dinner was on its way back up. She swallowed, hard, steadying herself.

"So you see, killing is obviously just another activity for these people here." Dino took a healthy swallow of iced tea. "Jen, you were married to the man for seven years. He must have told you something about himself. His friends. His family."

Jen pushed her plate away, tired of fiddling with it. "I've tried to explain it to you. I don't know what else to say. He told me his parents were dead, he had no siblings and he was estranged from the rest of his family." She gave a short laugh. "I can certainly relate to that. My family wrote me off years ago."

"Okay, tell me about friends. Who did you see? Talk to? Spend time with?"

"How many times do you plan to ask me that?" She bit the words off, then sighed. "I'm sorry. I know all this is important. And I certainly didn't want anyone else to be killed."

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He reached across the table and took one of her hands in his. "None of this is your fault, so just get rid of that idea. But it *is* John's fault, so we have to keep trying to find all the pieces of the puzzle."

"Like I told you, if John wasn't working we stayed at home. He said he needed the quiet time to recharge." She twisted her lips in a caricature of a smile. "I'll just bet he did."

As he picked and pushed, rephrasing questions to come at things from a new angle, she was startled and nearly embarrassed to realize just how sterile her life had been. She'd been so glad for the respite from the wildness of her former life style, she hadn't questioned anything about John or their marriage or his activities.

And of course there was Deanne, the center of her universe. Everything was focused on her. Now the weird fact stared her in the face: outside of the museum events they attended and her activities with Deanne, they'd had no social circle at all.

Nervous fingers spun her spoon around and around. "Is your friend all right?"

"His name is Smiley." Dino snorted. "It would take more than a blown tire to kill him. But he obviously yanked someone's chain. We need to find out who, and he's only been focusing on the museum board of directors so far."

"I told you." She felt her voice rising. "I just don't know who could be involved." She leaned forward. "Listen, these people barely looked at me or spoke to me, unless I was working on a project for one of them. I was a cipher. A

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nobody. John had a wife. Good for him. Next order of business, please.

"Okay, okay. Take a deep breath." He rose from his chair and reached for her hands. "Let's go back to the house and try this from a different angle."

"Like what?"

"I'll pull up a list of everyone on the museum board, we'll Google them and you can try to fill in the blanks."

If it hadn't been for the solid feel of Dino's body against her on the ride home, Jen was sure she would have fractured into a million tiny pieces.

* * * *

The man who handled ticklish situations for Mac still wore his jeans and blazer, looking unruffled despite the anger of the man sitting opposite him in the dark bar.

"We missed." He shrugged. "Big deal. He'll just think he ran over a nail and blew a tire. There'll be other opportunities. Relax, Mac."

Mac was far from relaxed, his body rigid with tension. "Worse than that, you don't seem to be able to find a trace of the woman and the child."

"Yeah, well." He sipped at his ice water. He never drank alcohol when he was on a job. "That's a little more difficult."

"For what I'm paying you, nothing should be difficult." Mac downed the rest of his drink and signaled for another. "Did you send a team out to the cabin?"

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The man nodded. "Are you trying to tell me how to do my job? They were out there doing cleanup the next day. There isn't a trace of anything left."

"Including the woman and the child," Mac said, his voice thick with bitterness and condemnation.

"We'll get them. She's been isolated for eight years. Wherever she's hiding, she'll have to surface soon."

"There are millions riding on this," Mac pointed out. "On these pieces in particular. People are expecting me to handle this. I don't intend to have some idiot female blow it out of the water for me."

"Trust me. It'll be taken care of."

"What did you do with the body and the car?"

The man curved his mouth into a humorless grin. "Start watching the news for accident reports." He rose, tossed some money on the table. "I'll call you when I have something to report."

"It better be damn soon."

* * * *

Dino drove the bike right up to the shed, waited until Jen climbed off, and then put it away. He led her up a short flight of stairs at the rear of the house and unlocked three locks to open the back door. As soon as they were inside, he turned off the security system before it could beep, closed the door, and reset the keypad.

Immediately he opened the laptop and checked his emails. Little padlock icons indicating four secure messages blinked at

him. The trick would be to read them without Jen hanging over his shoulder.

"Well?" She was standing beside him, almost touching him. "Aren't you going to open them?"

"Jen." He shifted in his chair. "These might not have anything to do with you. You realize that."

"But they could," she insisted. "And I have a right to see them."

"After I read them," he told her. "I'm not about to expose my sources to unsecured eyes."

"Unsecured eyes?" She gave a very unladylike snort and Dino almost laughed. "What, you think I'm going to run through the streets shouting their names? Or call up the local newspaper with a big scoop? Get real, Dino. All I want is to get Deanne and me out of this mess."

"Go in the kitchen and take a bottle of wine out of the fridge," he told her. "There're glasses in the cupboard right next to it. Pour us some wine and by the time you get back, I'll know what's what with these emails."

Jen stomped off, ponytail vibrating with every step. Dino watched the swaying of her hips, far too conscious of the sudden tightening in his groin and the spike of lust that drove through him. The things he'd never allowed himself to feel for this woman eight years ago had never gone away, just hidden waiting to jump out and torment him. He'd need all his discipline not to drag her into bed and tell her what he wanted her to mean to him. This was business, not pleasure.

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Sighing, he turned back to the computer. Clicking on each email in turn, he read them quickly, not happy at what he saw.

"Well?"

Jen was back with the bottle and the glasses.

Dino raised an eyebrow. "The whole bottle?"

"I figured if we don't drink it I'll have it handy to beat you over the head with." She filled the glasses and passed one to him. "So give."

He sipped at the wine, carefully choosing his words. "I don't know any other way to say this, Jen. I've gotten some interesting emails back from my contacts. It seems your nice, safe husband happens to have gotten himself into one of the dirtiest businesses in the world. And he was probably in it for a long time."

She dropped into the chair next to him, her face suddenly pale. "You mean more than just the last year or so?"

Dino restrained an incredible urge to scoop her up onto his lap and cradle her against his body. She suddenly looked as if one snap of the finger and she'd crumble into dust. He wished he could sugarcoat the information but it wouldn't do anyone any good. They needed it all to backtrack to the people in charge.

"I'd say probably for as long as you've known him. That's how he got the money to gamble with. His percentage of illegal sales."

"But how ... But what..." She scrubbed her hands over her face as if trying to wipe everything away.

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Dino picked up her wine glass and wrapped her fingers around it. "Drink. Chug it if you want to. Get something in your system to get your blood moving, honey."

He nudged her hand until the glass reached her lips, then watched while she took two healthy swallows. A little color washed back into her face but the stunned look never left her eyes.

"I don't understand any of this, Dino. Nothing. How could I not know?"

"I'd say he was very clever at it. After doing it for a long time it becomes second nature." He sipped at his own wine. "The stolen antiquities market is so big and has been going on for so long." He set his glass down and pulled a pad of paper and pen toward him. "Here. Let me show you."

Jen watched as he drew a diagram with boxes on the paper.

"This is how it works," he told her. "Someone locally in a place like, oh, say Thailand or Mali or Egypt—one of those countries, anyway—gets hold of relics that should go to the state. Instead they contact the person they know locally as a 'dealer.' That person contacts his or her overseas connections and arranges to smuggle the pieces out of the country. Once they reach their destination, they move up the food chain."

"And then what happens?"

"Someone like John, who receives them, contacts the person he works with who makes the connection to the buyer. Voila! Dollars in, antiquities out."

Jen pushed herself up from her chair and began pacing the tiled floor, rubbing her arms as if she was cold. She stopped

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in front of Dino and studied his face. "What else? I know there's more."

Nothing you want to hear, sweetheart.

"The people who shot John? No doubt hired by whoever is in charge of this operation. And they probably do it more often than you'd like to think. There are as many bodies littered throughout the world in this nasty business as there are items to sell. It's a damn good thing you went to Ethan or you and your daughter might be history by now. Or worse."

"But I don't know anything," she cried. "I can't tell them anything."

"They can cause a lot of physical pain before they believe that." He tossed down the pencil. "I emailed Ethan and asked him to check the background on all the museum board members. Let's see who travels overseas and where they go. It's a place to start."

"You're convinced it's one of them?"

Dino nodded. "I'd say it's our best bet. And I'd also bet money John had been doing this before and that's why he was hired." He watched her chew on her lip, trying to absorb it all. "Jen, assuming John did take the pieces, can you think of any place he might hide them?"

"No. Not at all." She shook her head, then collapsed into her chair. "God, Dino. What am I going to do?"

He took one of her hands in his, wondering if she, too, felt the jolt of current that zapped the air. Did she hold onto his hand a little longer than necessary or was that just his imagination? Again he had to remind himself that Jennifer LaCroix was a body for him to guard. Period.

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Get your act together, buddy boy.

He squeezed her hand and sat back, forcing himself to release his hold on her. "Why don't you finish your wine and get into bed. You've had a hell of a ride for the past few days and you could use the rest."

"You want me out of the way," she guessed.

He didn't argue with her. "I have to do some follow up on those emails I got. It looks like we're going to have to tear John Sutherland's life apart, along with all the people at the museum. The less you know about the people I contact the better off you are."

"But I want to know what you find out," she protested.

"And you will. Tomorrow. When I have something to tell you. Now go on. Let me do my job, okay?"

He could see she wasn't happy but she was also too tired to argue with him.

"Just yell if you need anything," he told her retreating back.

"I'm fine." The screen door banged behind her and Dino pulled out his sat phone. First call was to a contact in Mali, where most of the pieces he'd learned about seemed to come from. Then he'd try Van Dine one more time.

* * * *

Jack Smiley was making his own contacts, this one in a neighborhood bar in Farmington, just west of Detroit. The place had been around forever, making its name in the heyday of the folk music era, then drifting into its current identity as a darkened gathering spot where people could

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come not to be seen. It had somehow managed to stay under the radar, so it provided a relatively safe meeting place.

Jack had slipped in the back door from the gravel parking lot and found a spot in a corner booth away from everyone's view. The man who joined him five minutes after he arrived didn't look too happy.

"If it weren't for the fact that I don't trust telephones," he told Smiley, "I'd never have agreed to this."

Smiley raised an eyebrow. "You think your phones are bugged?"

"I think everything is bugged. And I use a new cell phone every day."

"That could get expensive."

The man nodded. "That's why this is going to cost you a hefty sum."

"Then it better be worth it." Smiley shoved a drink across the table. "Here. I took the liberty of ordering for you and told the waitress to get lost. So give."

The man downed half of his drink, then reached inside his jacket for two folded sheets of paper and slid them across the desk.

"Here's what I could find out."

"Thanks. Appreciate it."

"Hey." The man gave a short laugh. "Couldn't have you getting shot at again, now could I?"

Smiley took the sheets and smoothed them out, moving the tiny lamp on the table so he could read better. "How'd you get this stuff?"

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"From people you'd rather not know, and that's saying a lot."

Smiley took a sip of his drink. "So Sutherland was brought here and put in this position just for this purpose? That's what my guys thought."

"Whoever did it was aware he knew the ropes and they needed someone who wouldn't make waves."

Smiley looked up. "What about the gambling?"

"A cover. They applied pressure to get him to continue."

"Do it or we'll make sure the police know you've been doing it all along?" Smiley quirked an eyebrow. "Exactly how would they do that without revealing themselves?"

The man grunted. "I think the message was, do it or we'll kill you and your family."

"But you still don't know who's behind it?"

"There are at least four possibles. Maybe all of them. But someone will have to dig deeper than I can to find out."

Smiley folded the sheets and put them in his jacket. "And I know just the people." He held out his hand. "Thanks for everything." When he released the handshake, a thick wad of folded money had passed from one man to the other without anyone being the wiser.

Smiley dawdled over his drink until the other man had been gone a good half hour. He didn't think anyone had followed him to the bar. He'd taken a pretty roundabout way to get there. But there was no use in taking chances in them being seen together.

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Checking his watch one last time, he drained his glass, rose from the booth, tossed some money on the table and left quietly by the back door.

The lights were out in the parking lot again, which for Smiley was both good and bad. There was no moon tonight so there was nothing to illuminate him. High hedges ran along two sides of the lot, providing covering for the space where he'd parked his car.

Still, he was extra cautious as he made his way to his parking space, checking the area all around him, using the other cars for cover as he moved slowly along. He had reached his car and was just pushing the button for the automatic lock when he heard a familiar sound that made his stomach knot.

Snick!

Before he could identify exactly where it came from and drop to the ground, it was followed by a soft *pop* and the bullet found its way into his heart. Two more shots peppered him as he fell, but he was dead before he hit the ground.

A slim figure crept out from the hedges, bent low, watching the parking lot for other patrons. He quickly searched Smiley's pockets, found the folded papers and took them along with Smiley's wallet. Then like a wraith, he was gone, leaving nothing but the dead body behind.

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Chapter Seven

Dino had about decided to call it quits for the night. It was nearly one in the morning and he'd made the calls he needed to from the secure phone. The rest would have to wait until tomorrow when he was out on the water and away from 'accidental' listening devices. His scrambler worked well but he always believed in giving himself the edge. Already he had people in all the corners of the world looking into what he needed, and he had to give them time to get results. Now he was at a standstill until someone got back to him.

Damn that Van Dine.

He was the best source and still unreachable.

Dino rose from his chair and was heading inside the house when the phone vibrated in his hand. He'd shut the ring tone off to make sure Jen didn't hear all the call backs and ask him what was happening. He wanted to keep things close to the vest until he had something concrete to tell her.

He looked at the incoming number and frowned. What now?

"This can't be good news," was his greeting to Ethan.

"The worst kind." Ethan's voice was thick with emotion. "Jack Smiley was meeting with a source tonight and was supposed to get back to me hours ago. When he didn't, I tried his cell. No answer."

"And?" Dino's body tightened in anticipation of bad news. "I know there's more."

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"His cell has a GPS chip in it. I tracked it and called another old contact up there. Someone Jack uses now and then. Dino, Smiley's dead."

Dino's hand tightened on the phone. In any mission, when the bodies started falling it was time to get out the body armor and to be extra careful. It also meant they were squeezing someone's balls and getting a response.

"Are the cops on it yet?"

"Yeah." He could tell Ethan was keeping a tight rein on his anger. "The body was in the parking lot of a bar where he sometimes meets people, shoved back under a hedge where it was barely visible." Ethan grunted. "The lights were all out. Big surprise. Thank God there was no one in the parking lot at the time. Anyway, my guy checked to make sure Jack had nothing on him to trace back to us, then called 9-1-1."

"Whoever killed him could have searched him for anything leading back here." Dino rested his hips against the porch railing. "Anything taken?"

"His wallet and his watch, but I think just for effect. To throw people off."

"Well, hell." Dino ground his teeth. "We need to find out what information he'd gotten. Can your contact follow up on this?"

"All right." Ethan's sigh was like a soft breeze over the phone. "But I think we need to assume whatever he found has to do with members of the museum board. There's no way this could have gone down without at least one or two of them involved. Someone waxed the slide for Sutherland to get the job and that same someone or someones made sure

they kept him in a bind. We have to pick up where Smiley left off."

"Fine. I'll make some calls, send some emails, and hack into some data bases. See what I can find from here. But E, we do need someone active up there. Smiley was obviously onto something. Let me handle it, okay? You need to keep a very low profile on this one."

Ethan chuckled but there was no humor in the sound. "Think I'm too old and out of shape?"

"No. I think you're too married and too lucky to put what you've got in jeopardy. I can keep Jen hidden away and still follow this up."

"I find it interesting that nobody's found Sutherland's body yet."

"I'm willing to bet whoever's in charge sent a cleanup crew."

"Listen," Ethan paused, "I don't know if we should tell Jen about this latest development. Or what we suspect about the body."

"Jesus, Ethan." Dino straightened and began pacing his porch. "She saw her husband killed. This can't be worse than that. She needs to know things are escalating so I can keep her under control."

"All right. Do what you think best," Ethan told him. "Just keep her safe."

"Working on it, buddy. You know you can trust me."

He had a sickening feeling in his stomach that the body count was just beginning to pile up. He disconnected the call and rubbed his hand over his eyes.

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It was hard to believe he'd lasted in the business he was in for so many years, the calendar telling him forty-four was right around the corner. Wasn't it just yesterday he'd been holding his shiny new diploma when a man in a black suit approached him with an offer that changed the course of his life? It wasn't until he'd arrived at Langley, Virginia, for intense training that he realized just how much of a change and what was expected of him.

He had special skills they were looking for, like the ability to blend in with any crowd or community. An aptitude with languages. A quick mind and an extraordinary ability to think on his feet. No desk job for Nina and Tito Brancuzzi's little boy. Before he could finish telling his parents his cover story, he was whisked away into the shadowy world of spy and counterspy, doing whatever was asked of him and doing it so well he surprised even himself.

Along the way he collected two things—a rash of enemies and the friendship with Ethan Caine. Of all the people he knew in the world there was no one he trusted more. They met during a joint operation when Ethan was working for another one of the alphabet agencies and hung together whenever possible. It always amazed him how many times their paths crossed as they went about their jobs.

If he lacked for anything it was time to spend with his family, something brought home to him when, on a snowy night on a twisting road, a semi rolled over the Brancuzzis' car, killing both of his parents. He resigned from Langley the next day, dug into the money he'd saved and found himself a

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hiding place in Key West where he could watch the world go by.

He'd always wanted a boat, so he bought one and spent his days on the water, fishing. One day as he was getting ready to go out, a couple of stranded tourists asked if he'd take them out for the afternoon, and Blackwater Charters was born. Then Langley came calling and asked if he'd take a fishing charter of a different kind, and the new pattern was set.

He sighed, remembering his mental musings of the day before when Ethan had called him, and the feelings rocketing through his body now every time he touched Jen in any way. The feelings he'd put a lid on all those years ago. Would he ever find the kind of situation Ethan had with Lisa or was the lure of the adrenaline still too strong? Having Jen reappear in his life had certainly given those thoughts a nudge and made him take a good hard look at where he was in life. Was Fate handing him a new card in the deck? If so, would he be smart enough to play it right?

He had just stepped through the front door when a high-pitched scream from Jen's bedroom curdled his blood. He slammed the door and threw all the locks, then raced toward Jen's room, yanking his gun from his waistband.

When he shoved open Jen's door, he was shocked at the sight of her in the light from the hall. She was sitting up in bed, eyes glazed, every muscle in her body drawn taut, and the scream still echoing from her throat. Checking to make sure the room was secure, he stowed the gun and turned on

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the bedside lamp. Even that didn't seem to penetrate whatever terror was gripping her.

Very gently, he sat down on the bed and placed his hands on her shoulders.

"Jen?" He gave her a slight shake. "Jen, can you hear me?" Her eyes stared straight through him.

"Jennifer?" He shook her again. "It's me, Dino. Wake up."

Still no response, and he needed to snap her out of it.

Later, he couldn't have said if what he did next was to shock her out of her nightmare, or an irresistible urge to taste her lips, see what they felt like. But before he could change his mind, he simply cupped her face with his large hands and kissed her. He meant it to be just a brief touch, lips against lips, but her mouth was so sweet, her lips so soft he couldn't pull away. Somehow his tongue found its way into her open mouth and she was responding with heat that scorched him.

His mind kept screaming at him to take it easy, but his body had other ideas and kicked itself into high gear.

In the next instant she was pushing hard at him, panic in those unseeing eyes. "No. Keep away from me. No, no, no." Her head whipped back and forth like the pendulum on a clock.

"Jen, it's me." This time he almost shouted, grasping her hands and holding them against his chest.

As if a broom had swept it away, the haze disappeared from her eyes to be replaced by confusion and panic.

"What ... Dino? What's happening?"

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He sat down next to her, still gripping her hands. "You had a nightmare, sweetheart. The way you screamed down the house, I thought all the devils in hell were attacking you."

"Oh, God." Tears trickled down her pale cheeks.

Her body trembled in his grasp, so he released her hands and pulled her against his chest, soothing her. "It's okay. Really. Take deep breaths, okay?"

Her body shook with the force of her sobs, his shirt absorbing her tears. He pressed his cheek against the softness of her hair and stroked her back, making soothing noises, waiting for the storm to pass. He had no idea how long they sat there like that, her body pressed against his. But after a while he became aware of the softness of her breasts against his chest, the silken feel of her hair against his face, and the hard bulge pressing against his fly that he was having more and more difficulty disguising.

When he was sure she had regained some semblance of control, he set her gently away from him and tilted up her face.

"Better?"

She nodded, wiping at her eyes with the heel of one hand.

"How about you go throw some cold water on your face and come out on the porch. I'm going to open a couple of wine coolers I picked up. Emergency rations, just in case. I think you could use one right about now."

"Okay," she hiccupped. "Dino, I'm sorry. I..."

"Not a problem. But I think I need to get out of this room right now, okay?"

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He stood up, thankful that he had on a loose shirt to cover his bulging fly. Jen looked up at him and blushed, the same delicate shade of rose he'd seen that one other time.

"I hope you don't think—"

"I think we need to go sit on the porch and talk about your dream." Then, because he couldn't help himself, he leaned down and placed a light kiss on her mouth. "And I think I'm in big trouble here, but don't worry. I'll do my best to behave myself." He winked at her and left the room.

* * * *

Four people sat in the richly-paneled den in a massive stone house in the elite suburb of Bloomfield Hills, Michigan. Two opened bottles of wine nestled in a bucket of crushed ice. The cost of the two could have paid an executive's salary for a month. The furniture in the room was upholstered in the richest, most supple, most expensive leather available and the Persian rug on the polished hardwood floor cost a king's ransom. Paintings by some of the world's greatest artists adorned the walls and a small Michelangelo sculpture sat on a glass shelf.

For some, this would be the grossest example of conspicuous consumption. For these people it was just one of the perks of their way of life.

Two women—Patsy, a blonde, and Monica, a redhead—sat gracefully on the long couch, sipping at their wine. Behind the rosewood desk, Henry, a tall, heavy-set man with iron grey hair let his gaze move slowly from one to the other. Mac, a rangy man in expensively casual clothes, relaxed in a large

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arm chair. His was the only name ever mentioned in conversation outside this room. The man who handled things on the outside. Despite their almost paranoid preparations for secrecy, they all feared discovery, especially electronically.

Recent events had brought them together for a rare meeting, but trouble always called for unusual measures.

"So," Henry said, setting his goblet precisely on a coaster, "we're all agreed we have a problem."

"I'd say that's a mild way of putting it," Monica told him. "I thought you had John Sutherland under control."

"Greed makes a man do foolish things," he pointed out, then laughed as if he'd just told a hilarious joke.

"You would know," Mac said.

Henry took another sip of his wine. "It isn't just the fact that Sutherland's wife and child have disappeared, and along with them any trace of the two artifacts he held back. Someone is probing into this situation, and it's not the police."

"Wellborn said a man spent a lot of time questioning him," Patsy told him.

"Yes. Well, that man's been taken care of."

"And if someone else takes his place?" she asked.

"We'll have to take care of him, too," Mac said.

She fiddled nervously with her glass. "We can't simply keep killing people off."

Monica set her glass down hard on the cocktail table in front of her. "With the amount of money at stake here, and the need to protect ourselves, I don't see any other solution."

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"Until the bodies begin to pile up," Henry pointed out. "How will we explain all of that? We never should have accepted these last items. We all knew they were dangerous. If they turn up in the wrong place and lead back to us, we're all screwed."

"We'll make sure nothing points back to us," Mac assured him with exaggerated patience. "Meanwhile, it is imperative that we find Jennifer Sutherland. She's the only one who can possibly tell us where John hid those pieces."

"Well," Henry said, "just how do you propose we do that? She seems to have fallen off the face of the earth."

"We need to hire more people. I can't pull my man because I need eyes on the street in case someone does replace Jack Smiley."

"Money is no object," Monica interjected. "You must know more people with connections who can keep their mouths shut and operate under the radar."

There was a long silence while they all stared at each other. Finally, Mac nodded his head.

"All right. I'll look into it. Let's conference tomorrow night. I hope to have an answer by then."

They finished their wine in silence. One by one, they left the house, driving into the night, each deep in thought at the mess they'd somehow gotten themselves into. And the effect and repercussions that disclosure would have on their well-established lifestyles.

* * * *

"Better now?" Dino asked.

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They'd been sitting on the porch, Dino with a beer and Jen with a wine cooler, for most of an hour. Mainly, Jen had just sat looking out toward the Gulf and staring at the startlingly clear nighttime sky overhead.

He'd listened carefully as she told him about the dream. About the living nightmare that had brought it on. About the years leading up to this. Everything. And in her tone he heard the sound of a woman who'd lived hard and wanted normal. Whatever normal was. He felt that stab at his heart again.

He had to keep reminding himself that she was just part of the favor he was doing for Ethan. The last time he'd let a woman get to him like this, it had taken him years to heal. But damn. There was just something so sweet, so warm about Jen when she let her guard down. In her long sleep shirt, with her hair tumbled around her face, there was a vulnerability about her that kept reaching out to him.

Don't be a sucker, you idiot. This can take you no place.

He swallowed a sigh and tried to make his brain work.

She turned her head toward him now and gave him a weak smile.

"Yes. Thank you." She took a sip of her by now warm cooler. "You're really a very nice man. You know that?"

He laughed. "I could give you a long list of people who would disagree with you." His gaze traveled over the outline of her face and body from the diffused light of the street lamps. "I'd say anyone who's been through what you have would definitely have a nightmare or two. Watching your husband killed in front of you and trying to shield your daughter can be very emotionally damaging."

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Jen sighed. "I think the whole thing bothers me even more because I didn't love John the way I thought I should, so I can't grieve for him the way he deserves. Deanne certainly didn't deserve to be dumped into the middle of this."

"Don't you worry about Deanne. Ethan and Lisa will take good care of her mental health. And Jamie will help, too. My job is to take care of *you*."

She twisted the empty bottle in her hands. "I don't want to be anyone's job, Dino."

"I should have phrased that differently. It will be my great pleasure to look after you. Dig information out of your mind. And figure out how to get you out of this mess." He swallowed the last of his beer. "Jen, can you think of anyone else who might be connected with this? Anyone who might have been putting the pressure on John?"

"He never saw anyone but the board members from the museum. And whoever he gambled with."

"Okay. I think we've lived with this enough for tonight. Tomorrow I want you to dredge up every detail you can of everyone related to the museum. That's got to be where it starts." He stood up and reached a hand out to her. "Think you can get some sleep now?"

She gave him that shaky smile again. "Yes. Thank you very much. I don't think this was exactly what you signed on for."

He couldn't help himself. He pulled her close to him and wrapped his arms around her. "I signed on for whatever it takes, Jen. Whatever it takes."

* * * *

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The first thing that crossed Jen's mind when she opened her eyes was she had no idea where she was. Carefully she looked around the neat, colorful bedroom, taking in the brightly painted chest of drawers, the sheer curtains at the windows, and the striped cushion on the window seat.

Then she remembered. Every bit of it. Where she was and how she got there. The nightmare last night and Dino's incredible tenderness as he talked her through it. The way he restored a semblance of calm to her tortured mind as she relived the gunshot over and over again. She couldn't remember the last time anyone had been that gentle with her, that caring. And, despite the invisible threads that were definitely tugging them together, she was, in reality, a virtual stranger to this man.

Tendrils of the nightmare still clung to her, the sound of the shot, the image of John's body bleeding as he fell to the floor. The fear that she and Deanne would be discovered. In her dream, the men in the cabin had spotted the air conditioning grillwork and yanked it out, exposing Jen curling her body protectively around her daughter's.

What choices we make in life, she thought. All those years living the wild life, the crazy parties, the instability. Of course, she'd met Ethan and now she had Deanne, so something good had come out of it. She'd been so sure marrying John had been the answer to everything, but he'd turned out to be an enigma, warm and caring one minute, cold and remote the next. She'd struggled to create a good environment for her

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daughter, but living the lie of a perfect marriage had drained her.

How could she not know he'd been gambling? How could she not know what he'd been up to?

Because you didn't want to know, said a little voice in her head.

And now here she was, with no options except to trust Ethan and his friends. Especially Dino Brancuzzi. He had such an air of self-assurance about him, yet not with the arrogance Ethan had always displayed, or the sense that life on the edge was where it was at. Dino was a man comfortable in his own skin. His dark eyes held the wisdom of the ages, promising security and safety. And while he exuded sex appeal, it was a smoother, more controlled kind than the raw sexuality that always rolled off Ethan in waves.

Why couldn't I have met him all those years ago? Before I had nothing left to offer a man? Not that he'd want me anyway.

Last night at dinner she had answered questions until her head hurt, but she knew they really hadn't even scratched the surface. Somewhere hidden in her brain were pieces of information she didn't even realize were valuable.

If it was up to her, she'd expend all her energies trying to figure out where stupid John had hidden those stupid antiquities that he'd been stupid enough to think he could steal. But she'd come to Ethan knowing he was probably the only person on earth who could help her, and he'd brought Dino into the equation. That meant she had to play by their rules, and somehow she had the feeling that even if they

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found the pieces, they had no intention of just handing them over to the people who had killed John. They were all about finding the people and putting them away. Breaking the connection. And probably, without that, she'd never be safe anyway.

Dino said he wanted her to dig into her mind and give him every scrap of information tucked away in there, including the descriptions of the men in the cabin. That meant she needed to put aside the nightmares and get her brain in working order. If she could just get rid of the fear that sat in the middle of her stomach like a lump of undigested food.

She sighed and forced herself out of bed. In the bathroom across the hall, Dino had thoughtfully left a stack of towels for her and a fresh bar of soap. She wanted to cry at the man's consideration. It wasn't much. Probably not more than he'd do for anyone else. But she couldn't remember the last time a man, any man, John included, had made simple gestures like this where she was concerned. Standing in the hot shower, she let the stream of water beat away the tears that rolled down her cheeks.

* * * *

As usual, Dino was up with the sun. Years of habit were hard to break. He started the coffee, then checked both his phone and email for messages. His contacts had been busy. Via email he had complete profiles on every member of the museum board, a list of questionable antiquities dealers, and the names of three people in Egypt and Thailand who were

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known to be go-betweens for smuggled antiquities. That meant he could put people on this right away.

He had already called Ethan again to tell him this wasn't going to be a cheap exercise. Ethan had simply said whatever it cost, it cost. Just get the job done and call him back when he had his plan together.

He was on his second cup of coffee when he caught a glimpse of Jen hurrying from her bedroom to the bathroom. In seconds he heard the sound of the shower. Good. At least she was putting herself together.

He was still working at his laptop, studying the information when she came into the room. This morning she had her hair pulled into the ponytail again, but she'd obviously brushed it to a shine beforehand and applied a little blush and lip gloss. The shorts and print shirt she wore were the same emerald green as her eyes. He had to grit his teeth to get his body to behave. Of all the times in his life for his hormones to kick into gear, this was the absolute worst. Jennifer LaCroix needed safety and security, not a rampaging lunatic consumed with lust.

"Good morning."

Her voice was softer today. Less strident. He didn't know if it was the aftereffects of the nightmare or just the knowledge that her daughter was in safe hands and she could take a deep breath. Whatever it was, he liked the sound of it, and wondered exactly what this woman would be like if her past could just disappear.

"Hey. I made coffee." He inclined his head toward the kitchen. "Fresh pot. Help yourself."

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"Thanks." As she poured and stirred, she asked over her shoulder, "Anything new come up?"

"As a matter of fact, there's been a development." He kept his voice as low and even as possible. No matter how he told her about Smiley it would be a shock to her and rub nerves already raw. "Come sit down and I'll tell you."

She sat down in the chair cornerwise to him. "This doesn't sound so good."

Still keeping his voice in that even tone, he told her about Jack Smiley. Her face paled as if every drop of blood had suddenly left her body.

"These people are just going to keep on killing, aren't they?"

Dino nodded. "Probably. Until they get what they want. It's what they do."

"How can you be so calm about it," she cried, her tone anguished. "Are you so immune to things like this? That man died helping *me*. This is *my* fault."

He grabbed her free hand and stroked his fingers over the back of it. She was colder than ice. "Jen. Jen, listen. No one, including me, ever gets used to death. I wouldn't like the person I'd be if I did. But in our line of work it's a risk we all take knowingly."

"I won't have it." Her hand clenched into a fist under his. "You call Ethan and tell him to stop this now."

"And then what? Find a hole to crawl into for the rest of your life? There won't be one deep enough. Think of Deanne and what living like that would do to her."

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Her face filled with torment. "That's why Ethan isn't taking an active part in this, isn't it? Because of his family."

Dino nodded. "And that's why I'm running point."

"But I don't want anything to happen to you, either."

He tightened his hand over hers. "I'm a big boy. I've been doing this for years. I'll be fine and so will you and Deanne if you just let us do our jobs. Now." He cupped her chin and forced her eyes to look at his. "How about a little lesson in the stolen antiquities market? Let me tell you what I've learned and then we'll start with the questions and answers."

"I can hardly wait." She managed a small grin for him.

"The stolen antiquities market has taken a sharp spike upward in the last few years," he told her. "Movies like the Indiana Jones trilogy and the two National Treasures flicks have really excited interest in archeology and ancient relics. Egypt and Thailand seem to be the greatest points of departure for items being smuggled to other countries, as well as certain countries in South America."

"The museum has quite a collection of pre-Columbian and Mayan artifacts," Jen told him. "I did the brochures for the exhibits when John was arranging for them." She took a sip of her coffee. "But when the subject of antiquities came up I didn't even think of South America. I guess I'm just so used to thinking about them in connection with the Middle East. And that's probably where the heaviest traffic is. How exactly does it all work?"

"Here." He pulled a pad of paper and a pen over to him. "It's easier to show you."

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He drew a diagram on the page of interlocking boxes and labeled each one, then explained what they each meant.

"This is the traffic flow. There's a local source who finds the artifacts. Usually someone who's figured out a way to hang around archeological digs without raising suspicion and can swipe a few items at a time. That person takes them to an established local dealer who pays the finder a fraction of the final cost. Pennies, even. From there, they get shipped to an internal dealer. Or at least someone receiving for the dealer."

"Like John was doing."

"Right. That dealer then sells to the collector who pays an unholy price because the item is obtained illegally. And can't really even be displayed."

Jen frowned. "If the buyer can't display them, what's the good of having these things? Spending all that money?"

Dino tossed his pen on the table and rubbed the bridge of his nose. "You can't imagine how many people there are in this world who will pay just to have possession of something. To enjoy it for the sake of having it. I've heard about illegal collectors who have secret rooms in their homes where they go just to sit and look at everything they've got locked up."

Jen shook her head. "That's beyond anything I can understand. How does the dealer make the contacts? How does he know who to sell to?"

Dino picked up the pen again and drew more squares on the paper. "My guess? Whoever had John in a tight squeeze is a collector himself. Or herself. And at some point, maybe traveling overseas, was approached by a local dealer about

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buying something not on the open market. If the collector is smart enough and clever enough, he or she can snoop around and figure out how to set up a network like this. The museum was a perfect cover for receiving the stolen goods. John then turned them over to whoever was pulling his strings, and that person either found a buyer or had one ready."

"My God." Jen rubbed her forehead as if brushing away unwanted thoughts. "That could be anyone on the museum board. Or their friends. Roger Wellborn, the chairman, is a born and bred member of the highest social and financial ladders in Michigan. Maybe in the business world. His entire circle of friends and acquaintances could fit the bill. Maybe we should go over the list of people again."

"I have ... friends checking things out from all locations to find the most active network right now," he informed her. "I told them they need to ramp things up because we don't exactly have a lot of time to fool around. One of the people I've got on this said there's actually been some rumblings under the radar about a very hush hush antiquities ring run out of Detroit, and someone from the board would be in a great position to mastermind it. And to put pressure on John. I had one of them get me complete bios on all the museum board members, more than what I found on the Internet. Let's go over them one by one and you can give me your impressions. Your feelings about them."

"I'll tell you what I can." She shifted in her seat as if just thinking about this made her uncomfortable. "I want to do anything I can to help."

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"Good. And then, after breakfast, we're going out on the boat for a while."

Jen raised her eyebrows. "You really think we have time for ... Oh! Making the phone calls."

Including one last shot at Van Dine. He just hoped the man wasn't dead, which wouldn't be all that surprising.

"Right. I made a few last night so we could get started, but I'd really feel safer with the rest of them out there where it's harder to get a line on us."

"Let me fix breakfast, okay?"

"Absolutely not. I intend to dazzle you with my world famous omelets." He shoved a pad of paper and a pen at her. "Start making notes of anything that comes to mind that might be helpful. Including complete descriptions and your impressions of the board members of the museum and anyone else John came into regular contact with."

* * * *

Mac sat behind his desk, feet propped on an open drawer, desk littered with files that defied concentration as he did his best to keep the rising anger out of his voice. He was getting tired of no results except dead bodies. He'd reached out to his contacts as soon as he was in his car the previous night and started someone on the job right away. For all the good it was doing, he thought. No one seemed to know what the hell was going on, a situation that enraged him, although outwardly he managed to maintain control.

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"Please don't tell me that one middle-class woman and one little girl have managed to make themselves disappear," he said into his private telephone. "That's utterly ridiculous."

"Not so ridiculous when you're looking for them and can't find them," Grant responded.

"Perhaps you've lost your touch," Mac snapped.

"You didn't think I'd lost my touch when I got rid of that nosey snoop someone sent around. Would you rather I had just let him keep asking questions?"

"No, no, you did the right thing." Mac's tone eased a little. "But you have to find Jennifer Sutherland. And her daughter. She has the answer we need." He paused. "Get whatever help you need and dig back into her background. Perhaps she's contacted someone she knew before her marriage." He snorted. "Certainly nobody John Sutherland knew could or would help her."

"I may wake up a sleeping monster," Grant warned. "You don't know what's in her past."

"If so, just pull out your slingshot. But get me some answers."

Mac slammed down the telephone, his anger still simmering. The call before this one had been to the man he'd ordered to get rid of Jack Smiley when Smiley began sticking his nose into too many cracks. Mac had ordered him to clean up that mess, then do some backtracking on the man while he kept an eye out to see if a replacement showed up. He'd had nothing to report, either.

He pinched the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger, feeling a headache building. How on earth could

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this have happened? They had such a good thing going until John, the little weasel, got greedy. He had to get control of this thing that had suddenly taken on the personality of a runaway train. He couldn't afford exposure. His life—everything—would be destroyed.

* * * *

On a back street in Cairo, Charlie Waters stepped into a narrow alleyway, making sure no one heard him. He'd spent hours confirming he wasn't tracked before going to his special hiding place, then again as he meandered back into the city and blended with the crowds. He couldn't believe he'd gotten his hands on more of the "merchandise." The fact made his heart race faster and his breathing hitch. He couldn't believe someone had actually smuggled these items out of their country of origin without being detected. Not after the stink that had been made when a major looting of museum artifacts was discovered and a wholesale recovery mission launched.

The first time he'd only received two, excited even at the small number of pieces. And his buyers paid through the nose for them. The people he dealt with would pay even bigger bucks for a shipment this large. Maybe big enough to get Charlie off the streets and out of the business permanently before he lost his head. Literally. Taking a calming breath, he pulled out his secure cell phone and quickly punched a speed dial number.

"Yes?" the voice answered.

"It's me. You aren't going to believe what I have for you."

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"Unless they're fakes, of course I'll believe you. I expect the impossible from you, and you know that. What do you have this time?"

"More like the two special pieces I sent you. This time I have several items for you." Silence hummed along the line for so long Charlie wondered if they'd been disconnected. "Are you there?"

"Yes. I'm here. Are you absolutely sure these aren't fakes?"

"I swear it on my life. But I have to move them right away." He pulled in another long breath. "These will cost you more. Bringing them out was riskier than the delivery of any other items. People have to be compensated."

"Save the build-up and get to the point."

"Oh. If you're not interested..."

"I'm always interested," said the icy voice. "Describe them for me."

When Charlie finished the litany of what he had in his possession, there was another prolonged silence before the person on the other end spoke.

"How in hell did your ... friend get hold of them?"

"That's not a topic for discussion. Do you want them or not?"

"Of course I want them," the voice snapped. "How much?"

Charlie named his price and waited through another long pause.

"Very well. I'll have to confirm it with my partners, although I certainly don't see a problem. Not for what you're offering." Yet another pause. "We also have a little problem."

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"Problem?" Charlie frowned at the phone. "I don't like problems. They don't make for good business. Maybe I'll just contact another one of my buyers."

"No!" the voice shouted. Then in a calmer tone, "Don't do that. I just need to make different shipping arrangements."

"What's wrong with the one we've been using? It provides a perfect cover."

"That's ... where the problem comes in. It's temporarily unavailable."

"The museum's closed?" Charlie couldn't keep the surprise from his voice.

"No, you idiot. We just can't ship anything through it at the moment. We need a new destination, one where the items you provide will pass through customs easily." Charlie could almost hear brain cells working. "Let me talk to my partners when I call them to get approval to send the money. We'll have something in place by then."

"Hurry. My seller is impatient."

"You know *our* money is good, so don't get your shorts in a wad."

"Three hours. Then I move on."

He disconnected the call and shoved the phone in his pocket. Just what he needed. A problem. He already had enough trouble keeping his sellers from finding other contacts.

Shit!

* * * *

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Henry was losing his patience. Last night's meeting had been unsatisfactory, to say the least, and today each phone call to and from Mac had been another thorn in his side. Jennifer Sutherland and her daughter might as well have fallen off the earth as far as anyone could tell. They'd torn the Sutherland house apart looking for some clue as to the hiding place of the two artifacts—an ancient hand-hammered gold bracelet and a beautifully carved water jug—but there was nothing. Not a lead or a hint of any kind.

"And of all the damn pieces to go missing," Henry told his caller. "If anyone outside our circle gets their hands on them we could all end up in prison for a very long time. Those pieces have too much blood on them. Political blood."

"We'll find them. Stop acting like an old fool. Mac's working on it."

"Mac's people aren't getting anywhere," he snapped. "Maybe it's time to put this on hold for a while."

"And maybe you should step up to the plate with something besides hot air," the caller said, every word with a sharp edge.

"You know there's no way I can do more than I'm doing. I find the damn buyers and keep us under the radar. Someone else needs to accept the shipments or we really *will* be going out of business."

"Are you suggesting I be the one to do that?"

"You get shipments of goods constantly from all over the world. Do you want me to think you can't make an 'arrangement' to include these pieces in one of the shipments?"

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"That's not what I'm saying. We'll just have to be ... creative." The caller was impatient.

"Too bad your friend John put us in this bind, isn't it?" He paused for effect. "You do remember that you were the one who recommended him? Who knew of his gambling habits and his greed? And who said his family would be good leverage for us?"

"Fine. Fine, fine, fine. I'll make arrangements, but my 'dealer' isn't going to be happy about having to jump through hoops. This is a very ... unique ... shipment."

"Then up the ante," Henry demanded. "We've already agreed to pay his exorbitant price for facilitating our goods. Just sweeten the pot."

"All right, damn you. I'll handle it."

Henry flinched when the caller slammed the phone in his ear.

* * * *

"How's your arm?" Jen asked over breakfast.

"Fine. I told you, it's just a scratch. Nothing. Quit worrying." He pulled back the sleeve of his shirt to display a small square bandage. "See? Good as new."

"It's hard not to worry about someone when they have a bullet hole in them," she protested.

"I'm fine," he repeated, scraping up the last bite of egg. "It just grazed the flesh." He pushed his plate away. "Want to go over the museum stuff one more time?"

She frowned at him. "Honest to Pete, Dino. I think I've pulled even more stuff out of my brain than I thought I could

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possibly remember about the board members. And they're the only people we ever socialized with. Command performances, you know."

Still, he'd coaxed things from her she didn't even know were stored in her mind. People's attitudes. How they interacted with each other. What brought them to the museum in the first place and what John said about his job. Which was next to nothing. And now, with the sun beating down on her face, she felt more relaxed than she was sure she had a right to feel. This man seemed to chase away all her shadows, letting the light in. Too bad he hadn't been...

No. She gave herself a mental shake.

Don't go there.

"Okay." He rose and collected their plates. "Okay. Let's give it a rest for a while. Maybe something will pop up while we're out on the water. I find that's always a good place to think."

When Dino drove to the pier and walked her out to the end slip she got her first real look at what he called "my little charter boat." Her jaw dropped in astonishment at the magnificence of it as Dino ushered her up the ladder and onto the deck.

"Wow!" was all she could think to say as she turned in a slow circle. A cockpit rode high above the deck, enclosed by Plexiglas on three sides, material she was sure was bulletproof.

Dino grinned at her. "Let me give you the commercial. The Blackwater is forty-seven-feet long and has twin diesel

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engines. That won't mean much to you, but I can get speed out of this baby you wouldn't believe."

"What's below?" She peered down the stairway.

"Two staterooms, each with its own bathroom and a main room. A salon. All air conditioned." He indicated the two captain's chairs for deep sea fishing bolted to the deck at the prow and the hatch that he told her covered the live well where the fishermen stored their catch. "I carry everything a fisherman could need, including every piece of gear imaginable. And I've got state of the art electronics on board."

She had trouble taking it all in. "Somehow when you said fishing charter I expected, well, something different."

"An old scow, maybe? Battered and paint weary?" He chuckled.

"Well, no. Not if you charge people a hefty fee." She let her eyes travel over the polished deck and the thick cushions on the benches lining both sides of the bow. "Just not something so lavish, I guess."

"I had to establish a presence out here, Jen," he explained. "If I'm seen often enough taking the very wealthy out to catch fish, and going all over the Gulf and into the Atlantic to do it, then no one will think it strange if I wander here and there. I'm just that crazy charter captain whose office is a shack and who sank all his money in his boat. They leave me pretty much alone. Which is good, since not all my charters are actually for fish. Or maybe fish of a different kind."

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"I guess I never thought about it that way." She looked at him with curious eyes. "Do you go 'here and there' very often?"

He laughed. "I think I'm the one who's supposed to ask the questions today."

He walked her up to the cockpit and showed her the instrumentation, then explained what did what and how.

"You might want to just hang out on the deck until we get out of here," he suggested. "Not much to see up here except a lot of other boats. And the cushions on the bench down there are nice and thick. Comfortable."

And I'll be out of your way if your phone rings.

"Sure. That would be nice."

He was right. The bench was wide and the cushions were thick and foamy. She leaned her head back and let the sun kiss her skin, thinking for the moment about nothing. A luxury she hadn't had for a while.

They pulled smoothly out of the slip and headed south, Dino maneuvering easily among the boats close to shore. He drove the boat a good two hours from Key West before he found the spot he wanted. Then he dropped anchor in a secluded cove where he said they wouldn't be bothered by casual traffic.

"People come out here to dive a lot further out," he told her. "But nobody comes into this inlet unless they have monkey business in mind. And we'll be able to see them in plenty of time. We won't raise any eyebrows. You just keep relaxing while I make some phone calls."

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So she stayed in place on the padded bench, letting the tropical sun warm her, hoping it would reach the chill deep inside of her. She actually felt herself about to doze off when she heard Dino's footsteps as he came down the stairs from the cockpit.

"I think someone wants to talk to you." He grinned, holding out the sat phone.

She put the phone to her ear with a hand that shook slightly. "Hello?"

"Mommy?"

Jen squeezed her eyes hard to stem the tears that clouded them. "Hi, sweetie. How are you? Are you doing okay?"

"I'm fine. Are you all right? I miss you."

Jen couldn't believe the energy in the voice, the difference from yesterday when Deanne would hardly say a word. When all she could manage were tears. Lisa and Ethan must be miracle workers.

"Yes. I miss you, too, but otherwise I'm great."

"Jamie's parents are being very nice to me. Jamie is too. And Mommy?"

"Yes, baby?"

"They promised no one would ever hurt me. Mr. Caine gave me his special word."

Jen bit her lip, tears stinging her nose and clogging her throat. She had to take two or three deeps breaths before she could continue.

"That's right. That's absolutely right. And he always keeps his promises. You just do what they say and you'll be fine."

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"Mommy?" The voice took on a plaintive note. "When can I see you again?"

"Soon. I promise."

"As soon as the bad men go away?"

"Yes, honey. That's right. You be a good girl for your ... for Jamie's parents and I'll talk to you again tomorrow."

She handed the phone to Dino, unable to continue. He walked away, obviously giving her time to collect herself.

"Yeah, we'll be out here for a while," she heard him say in a low voice. "I'm still waiting for a callback from someone who owes me large, plus I've got some other hooks out. We'll just hang out here and grab some sun. Be away from people. Yeah. Okay. Later."

When he walked back and sat down beside her, Jen had managed to turn off the waterworks and even arrange her lips in a weak smile.

"I think you only get a C for that smile," he joked.

"I promise I'll do better." She twisted her hands together, looking down at them in her lap. "Thanks. For the call, I mean. Talking to Deanne really helps."

He reached up and stroked her cheek softly with the backs of his fingers. When she flinched subconsciously, his eyes widened a fraction, but he withdrew his hand without making a fuss or asking her questions.

"They'll take good care of her, Jen. I know it's hard being away from her, but it's for the best. We'll get this resolved as fast as we can. Count on it."

"Dino?"

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"Yeah?" He was concentrating on pouring two soft drinks for them, handing one to her.

"What else did you and Ethan talk about? You've been busier than a long distance operator on that phone since we got into open waters."

"I've got two people in Detroit working on this, picking up the threads Jack Smiley was following," he answered. "These are not nice people who are after you, Jen, but I don't have to tell you that, do I?"

"No, you don't." She closed her eyes as the feeling of panic threatened to race over her again.

"Hey, hey, hey." Dino slid onto the cushion next to her and took her free hand. "It's okay. *You're* okay. *Deanne's* okay. And we'll get this handled."

Jen took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Have they found out anything else?"

Dino released her hand, leaned back against the gunwale and took a swallow of his soft drink before answering.

"They've got themselves in a bind," he told her. "With John dead there's no way to ship any of the stolen items through the museum anymore. They can't exactly ask the assistant director to step into an illegal activity. And it would certainly raise eyebrows for the Chairman of the Board to decide to check in shipments himself. So I've got people looking at what they might use as alternatives."

He might have said more but the phone in his hand buzzed. He looked at the number on the readout and stood up.

"I have to take this in private, Jen. I'll be right back."

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* * * *

"I thought maybe you were dead," he told his caller.

"It takes more than most people have got to kill Martin Van Dine. How the hell are you?"

"How are *you*? And how come it took you so long to call me back?"

"You of all people should know I can't be too careful about things. I wanted to make sure it was really you." His laugh was anything but humorous. "But persistence pays off, my friend."

"I'm hardly your friend," Dino growled. "But I need a favor and you owe me one."

The man's voice sobered. "Yes. I do. So what is it you need?"

Dino explained the situation in Michigan and the stolen antiquities operation. "I need you to find out who the middle man is over there and what arrangements are now being made to ship things since the pipeline's broken. And especially any chatter about who's heading up the whole thing."

"Ah, antiquities. More lucrative right now than blood diamonds. People made millions from the huge theft that was in all the papers not too long ago."

"I thought everything was recovered, though."

"Propaganda," Van Dine told him. "A political statement. Only a third of them made it back to the museum. There are still a number of pieces floating around. This is a very nasty business, Brancuzzi."

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"Don't I know it."

"Especially when you realize where the money is going and what's being done with it."

Dino shoved his free hand in his pocket. The knot in his stomach was growing larger by the minute. "I need whatever information you can get for me, and I need it yesterday. Otherwise some people who have nothing to do with this will end up dead."

The same humorless chuckle echoed over the connection. "Someone got to you in your old age, did they? I can hardly believe it. The lone eagle is getting his wings clipped."

"Not at all," Dino denied. "Just helping a friend. So can you do this or not?"

"Give me a day and I'll get back to you. Will this number still be secure?"

"Even more so than yours. I'll expect to hear from you."

He disconnected the call and rubbed his forehead. If anyone could get him information, Van Dine could. And he needed all the help he could reach out to if he expected to keep Jen safe.

Jen. How had she suddenly become more than a project? Was Van Dine right? Was his carefully constructed solitude starting to shatter?

Jesus. What was he supposed to do if it did?

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Chapter Eight

While Dino finished making his phone calls and did whatever else he had to, Jen stretched out on the wide bench, tucked a loose cushion behind her head and closed her eyes. She hadn't expected to fall asleep, but the heat of the sun and swaying motion of the boat were so soothing, so calming, that she drifted off without realizing it. When a hand touched her shoulder her eyes popped open without seeing and she screamed as she rolled over onto the floor. Pulse racing, she struggled to her feet. Then warm hands took her shoulders and a familiar voice cut into her panic.

"Easy, easy." Dino's voice was warm and soothing, like melted chocolate. He eased her back onto the bench and sat beside her, taking one of her hands lightly in his and rubbing his thumb over her knuckles. "It's just me."

"I'm sorry. I guess I was just dreaming again and you ... startled me."

Good going, Jen. Much more of this and he'll be convinced you're a certifiable nut and dump you back on Ethan's doorstep.

"I'm sorry," she repeated, rubbing her face as if she could scrub the memories away.

"No problem." Dino slid his arm casually along the railing behind her, the fingers of his hand just resting on the nape of her neck. Testing her reaction, she knew, as aware as she was of whatever this was building between them. His touch felt good, soothing, and when he began to lightly massage

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the muscles that were tense and knotted, she leaned back into his touch, feeling the tension begin to slip away.

"You're too good to me," she told him. "Why are you even putting up with a nutcase like me?"

A low chuckle rumbled from his throat. "You're too hard on yourself, Jen. What you've been through would send most people into a total collapse. You kept your head. Figured out where you needed to go for help. And took care of your daughter."

"I don't deserve your compliment but I'll take it."

"Good. Now, how about some lunch? I brought a cooler full of goodies."

Surprisingly, she was hungry. "That would be nice. Can I help?"

"Nope." He gave her neck one last gentle squeeze before getting to his feet. "Got it covered. I'll yell when it's ready." He ran the backs of his fingers along the line of her jaw. "No more nightmares, okay?"

She shivered. "God, I hope not."

"Let me get the food out. I always believe a full stomach takes care of anything."

When she followed him below she couldn't restrain the gasp of surprise. "My God, this is like something out of the movies."

The salon looked like the sitting room of a suite, paneled in expensive fiddleback burl walnut like she'd seen in the home of one of the museum directors. Deep chairs and a couch were upholstered in tweeds of earth tones. A bar took up part of one wall and a granite dining table fit against

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another. Beyond, she could see the open doors to the staterooms.

"I don't think anyone I know could afford one of your charters," she told him with a rueful grin.

"All part of the image," he reminded her.

But as he opened the built-in fridge to take out the food he'd stored there, his sat phone buzzed against his hip. His eyes widened a fraction as he read the number.

"I need to take this alone," he apologized.

"No problem. I'll wait up on deck."

* * * *

Charlie Waters had hightailed it back to his hidey-hole, taking every precaution he'd learned in his misbegotten life to make sure no one was following him. Once he was safely secured, he checked again to make sure his previous cargo was safe. His hands trembled as he unwrapped the yards of burlap cushioning each one in the padded box.

Most of the objects he traded in didn't impress Charlie one way or another. They were simply a conduit for cash. But these! These were pieces of history in more ways than one.

His hands caressed the gypsum statue of an ancient worshipper, the grey stone spouted jar inlaid with limestone. His fingers danced on the surface of the ivory head of a woman. But the thing that made his mouth water was the intricately designed gold mask. Gold! Even Charlie was impressed with that. And with the fact that each of these items was more than three thousand years old.

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Reminding himself of the source of these items, and the danger to him as long as they were in his possession, he rewrapped them very carefully and locked them in the box, hiding it in the hole in the dirt floor and covering it over as he'd done before.

Those people better tell him where to take it for shipment pretty damn soon or he was going to find himself another buyer. Hopefully before he got killed.

As he was reviewing possible alternatives in his mind, his cell phone vibrated in his pocket. He snatched it out and flipped it open.

"You'd better have some answers for me," he greeted the caller.

"It's taken care of. We're using the same shipper, just a different delivery address."

"How's that gonna work? You don't want this stuff opened by customs."

"I've taken care of that. Here's what I want you to do."

* * * *

"You've got a tiger by the tail this time," Martin Van Dine told Dino. His voice was tight with urgency. "I don't know how the hell you stepped in this one, but I sure hope you're in good standing with Uncle Sam if you get caught."

Dino felt a tiny knot twist itself in his stomach. "What the hell do you mean?"

"The stolen artifacts market is risky enough, but this..." Van Dine's voice trailed off.

"This what?" Dino prompted. "What's got you so spooked?"

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"Something I don't even want to discuss over a secure phone. We'll have to meet. And bring a bagful of money, because once I tell you what I found out, I'll have to disappear for a long time."

"Van Dine, what the hell is going on? And where are we supposed to meet?"

"Where are you right now? Key West?"

Dino frowned. "Why would you ask that?"

"Jesus, Brancuzzi. The fact that you run a charter out of the keys isn't exactly a secret. Just not too many people know some of your charters don't involve fish."

Of course. He wasn't exactly hiding under a rock. He was just getting that itch on the back of his neck again. Something was very wrong here.

"Okay. Here it is." He gave the man the coordinates of their location. "But don't think I'm going to wait around here if you're sending someone to knock us off."

Van Dine grunted. "Even *I'm* not stupid enough to try something like that. Your friend Ethan Caine would follow me to hell. All right, it shouldn't take you long to get to the spot where I want you to meet me." He reeled off his own numbers. "Midnight. Turn off all the lights, including the running lights. I'll find you. And bring a million dollars in cash."

"Wait. How the hell am I supposed to get that much cash and meet you in time?"

"You'll figure it out. You always do."

* * * *

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"Do you have something?" Mac asked Grant, leaning back in his chair, phone tucked into the crook of his neck. Unlike the previous jobs he'd hired the man for, this time he seemed to be stymied. Unable to dig up the information he needed.

"Maybe. Maybe not. I decided the thing to do was dig a little harder into Jennifer Sutherland's background. I think that's where we'll start to find some answers. A woman like her doesn't just disappear without some expert help."

"And?" Mac tapped a pen irritably on his desk top.

"It seems before she met Sutherland she ran with a pretty wild crowd. We're trying to get the names of all of them and see who she might still be in contact with." Grant cleared his throat. "We're making a little headway but something's goofy here."

Mac sat up in his chair, tossing the pen on the surface of the desk. "Goofy? What do you mean, goofy?"

"We managed to dig up a couple of names, but no one's heard from Jennifer and they're not giving out any information about anyone else. Funny thing, Mac. It's almost as if they're more scared of the people she knew than they are of us."

"How is that possible? She's just some dumb broad who latched onto Sutherland for his paycheck and security."

"Mmmm, I don't know." Grant's skepticism was obvious even over the cell phone connection. "I think we've been taking her too lightly. Hell, she might even be the one who convinced Sutherland to steal those two pieces."

"Shit." Mac rose from his chair and began pacing the floor of his office. "You've got to find out who those people are. I'll

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bet my left nut she's run to one of them. Do whatever you have to." He waved his hand in the air. "Hell, make an example of one of them."

"I told you," Grant reminded him. "We're the last people they're scared of."

"Then figure something out," Mac spit out. "And do it quickly."

* * * *

"E? You still there?" Dino shook the phone, glancing over his shoulder at Jen. She was sitting on the cushions, watching him, a look of curiosity on her face.

"Yeah, I'm still here. A million bucks, huh?"

"Uh huh. But from him it will be worth it."

"I just wonder what Martin Van Dine, the man with twenty-nine lives, has to sell that's worth so much money."

"Don't know, but I'll tell you this much. He sounded panicked. And Van Dine didn't even panic when I had an AK 47 pointed up his left nostril."

"I can't imagine what there is about stolen antiquities to make him twitch. I thought the man had ice water in his veins."

"There's something about these particular pieces," Dino guessed. "That's all I can figure. But what would make them so special? People have been looting architectural digs and museums for centuries. The process has just gotten a little more sophisticated in the past few years."

"Well, while you and Jen are lazing around on the water down there, let me see what I can do about getting your

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money together. And maybe doing a little more research on the underground marketplace. Maybe something will pop up."

"I'll call Mike and have him get in touch with you. He's our best bet for quick delivery."

"All right. Get back to me when you've got a time frame."

"Dino?"

"Yeah?"

"How's Jen doing?"

Dino snorted. "Other than the fact that she's skating this side of a nervous breakdown and misses her daughter, I'd say she's doing great. She's got plenty of guts, I'll say that for her."

"She hasn't..." Ethan stopped and cleared his throat. "She hasn't had an easy life. That's probably why she jumped at what Sutherland had to offer. I'd like to see her come out of this with a good future for the two of them."

Dino looked at the phone as if the person on the other end had just spoken to him in an unknown language. "Are you giving me background or warning me off?"

"Neither. Just ... pointing something out."

"I don't suppose the fact that she's the mother of your daughter has anything to do with your concern." He glanced at Jen again, smiled and held up one finger to tell her he'd be done in a minute.

"And if it does?" Ethan's voice had turned hard.

Dino made his own voice softer. "Then I'd say it's normal for you to be concerned. But don't worry about Jen. She'll be aces high when this is over."

"Dino, listen..."

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"Trust me, E. I'm coming from the right place. Call me and give me an ETA for the money, okay? I better go." He hung up and walked back to Jen.

"Lots of mysterious phone calls." She smiled up at him.

He clipped the phone to his belt and lowered himself into the captain's chair across from her. Lines of strain were etched on her face and the look of fear was back in her eyes. He picked up both of her hands and closed his own around them.

"First of all," he told her, "Deanne is fine so don't get it in your head that the calls had anything to do with her."

"Okay."

She curled her hands into his palms. Despite the heat of the sun he could feel how cold they were. He had a feeling the chill went all the way through to her soul.

"Jen, there's something unusual about the pieces John stole and none of us can figure out what it is. Would you have any idea? Did he say anything? Let something drop?"

"No. Dino, I've told you. I don't—"

"Okay, okay. But I'm getting feedback that puts this outside the realm of ordinary artifact theft and that's not good."

"I don't know what to say. I was shocked just to find out he did it at all." She leaned forward, her eyes pleading. "You believe me, don't you?"

"I do. It isn't easy to fool me, Jen. I read people pretty well. I've had to for all these years."

"So what now?"

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"Now we put away the wine and make a pot of coffee. We'll have some sandwiches after a while."

She wrinkled her brow. "We're not leaving?"

He shook his head. "We're meeting someone late tonight. Not far from here. Maybe we'll have some answers then. Meanwhile we don't need fuzzy thinking or low blood sugar. So. Coffee and sandwiches."

He stood and pulled her up with him. They were so close there was barely room for a sheet of paper between them. He was still holding her hands when he leaned forward a millimeter and touched his lips to hers. Her mouth was soft, her lips like brushed velvet. Intoxicating. He didn't need wine when Jen was around. He could have gone on kissing her forever.

But as quickly as the kiss began, he broke off, mentally kicking himself.

"Jen, I'm sorry. I—"

But anything else he might have said was lost as she reached her hands up and pulled his head back down to her, kissing him as if her life depended on it. The first thing he felt was shock, then heat followed by a healthy dose of lust. Stronger than he'd felt in years, if he stopped to think about it, which he didn't. He gripped Jen's head and took her mouth, devouring it like a starving man at a banquet.

His tongue pressed at the seam of her lips and when she opened for him he swept it inside, licking and tasting. Her own small tongue met his as she welcomed his intrusion. She wove her arms behind his neck and locked him against her. The heat from the kiss could have incinerated both of them.

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Dino felt himself harden behind the denim of his jeans just as her breasts pushed their hard tips against his chest.

They stopped only when they became oxygen-deprived, gulping in air, looking at each other. Dino saw his own stunned reflection mirrored in Jen's. His heart was knocking against his ribs and he saw her pulse beating erratically in the soft hollow of her throat.

"Jesus." He drew in air again, let it out slowly.

She unwound her arms and would have taken a step away if he hadn't grabbed her.

"I-I'm sorry," she stammered. "I don't know ... that was totally inappropriate of me."

"No, *I* was the inappropriate one. But Jen. My God."

"I know." Her own breathing was still ragged. "What's going on here, Dino?"

"Something I think neither of us is sure we know what to do about." He pulled her against him, loving the feel of her small body against his hard one.

"There are things about my life ... things you don't know..."

He moved one hand to cup her chin and tilt her face up. "I think we both come with a history. There are things I've done I'm not proud of, things I could probably never tell you about. But it doesn't matter. What matters is what happens from here on out."

"And what's that?"

"I'm going to get you out of this mess and then we're going to see if we can find the same happy ending Ethan and Lisa have."

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She dropped her head and leaned it against his chest. He could feel tears soaking his shirt.

"If only," she whispered.

"We'll make it happen, Jen. I promise. And I don't promise things lightly."

* * * *

Martin Van Dine had lived his entire life on the edge, making and losing more money than most people could even dream about by buying and selling information. Some countries called him traitor, others a hero. He was the consummate spy whose services were for sale to the highest bidder. The ultimate mercenary, only without the morals that so many of them had developed these days.

He was a fairly nondescript person, which worked well for his line of work. Five-ten, unremarkable brown hair and hazel eyes, no distinguishing features, he could pass for anyone or no one. Neither his American mother nor his German father had really wanted him but they'd tolerated him until he was old enough to set out on his own. He'd never seen either one of them since then.

In his younger days he was a wheeler dealer. A kingpin. A shadow figure who slid in and out of trouble like a greased cat. But now he was much older, time had caught up with him and he needed to find a comfortable place where he could tuck himself away and spend the rest of his life without looking over his shoulder. Too many people had a target on his back.

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It was no coincidence that he happened to be within speeding distance of Dino Brancuzzi. The heat he'd felt first in Europe, then South America, then in Mexico, had nothing to do with the sun. Dino Brancuzzi had once told him he had twenty-nine lives, but it seemed he'd used up most of them.

Along the way, he'd picked up some very dicey information, hoarding it until the right buyer came along. This last little bit that should have resulted in a big payday had turned to shit because—and he hated to admit it—he wasn't as sharp on his game as he used to be. He'd had such an adrenaline rush from the news he'd picked up that he'd focused only on finding a way to trade it for a huge payday.

But someone knew he had discovered the nugget of information. Someone with a vested interest in not having that information passed along. Someone who made his living acting as the eyes and ears for a number of people. To let them know if somewhere in the information pipeline there was a leak. Enough people paid for his services that he lived very comfortably and he had no intention of screwing things up.

The man paying for his services at the moment was adamant that none of the information about his operation leak out to anyone. That no one get a whiff of anything. The people he represented were already distressed because a problem had come up that they were having trouble dealing with. It was only by the purest chance they'd discovered Van Dine had stumbled over the information and was getting ready to peddle it. Things were coming unraveled too fast. How the hell Van Dine found out who they were and what

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they were doing was a mystery when they'd been so careful. The stupid street dealer, no doubt. Shooting off his mouth at the wrong time and in the wrong place.

The sudden awareness of the man's presence had been a shock to Van Dine. Confident that he'd managed to evade anyone with an eye on him, he'd let the man come up on his blind side. He had to move fast, find the right buyer for his information quickly and get the hell out of the universe. Not only could this man cost him the pot of gold, he could also cost him his life. The people running this operation had more to lose than he did if the word got out.

Yes, that was the answer. Stay out of sight, get his buyer and disappear completely. Calling on the friends he could still rely on for help and secrecy, he'd worked his way up to Cancun, then, of all places, to the west coast of Florida. He had a new personality waiting for him, a whole new identity, in the one place no one would ever look for him. The country he'd screwed more times than a light bulb. The good old U.S. of A. He'd kept his ear to the ground for a way out this mess. And here, out of the blue, was his old enemy Dino Brancuzzi, who'd called not once but three times.

The call from Dino Brancuzzi had been a gift from the gods. When Van Dine discovered that the information he'd been hoarding was what Dino wanted, he knew he'd hit the jackpot and found a way out of his situation. Luck was going to be with him one last time. Dino Brancuzzi was about to subsidize the Martin Van Dine retirement fund. Could life possibly be more ironic?

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Smart enough not to reveal how close to Brancuzzi he was when he called him back, he set the coordinates for the meeting out on the water and made his plans. Brancuzzi would hand over the exorbitant sum he'd asked for—and hadn't even quibbled, Van Dine noted—Van Dine would give him the information, and they'd all live happily ever after. What could possibly go wrong?

Again, because he was sure he'd reached safety, he missed the eyes on him. No longer at the top of his game, he made trailing him an easy exercise, especially when he thought he'd arrived in a place where he could relax his guard.

But the man following him had his orders—fix the problem. His sophisticated electronic surveillance gear landed him the information that had arranged a meeting tonight on the open water. There he'd exchange his information for money to set himself up in a new life. The open water was a good place to get rid of someone and leave no traces. Best of all, no body. He watched while Van Dine arranged for a fast boat, then slipped quietly into the water to do what he needed to do. After that it was just a matter of waiting.

* * * *

Jen leaned back against Dino's chest, secure in the cradle of his arms, soothed by the gentle rocking motion of the boat. She had a slight caffeine buzz from all the coffee she drank but the sandwiches they'd eaten had taken some of the edge off. Dino had huddled in the cockpit making phone calls while she cleaned up the galley. Then they made themselves

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comfortable on deck, not speaking, just enjoying a closeness Jen had never felt with another living soul.

And something else. For the first time in her life she felt, if not safe, at least protected. Not that Ethan wouldn't have handled danger for her all those years ago. But that was mostly because Ethan was used to handling danger, not because of their relationship. John certainly wasn't someone who made her feel secure in the world, although at the very end he'd given his life to save hers and Deanne's.

But Dino Brancuzzi wove an invisible shield around her. He was a warrior who had her back and would keep the world at bay, without expecting anything in return, unlike most of the men in her life. That was the important thing. There was no bargain here.

The feel of his body reminded her of the threads of something creeping into their relationship, whatever that turned out to be. The incendiary kiss they'd shared promised so many things. Did she even dare to think of what they were? She couldn't remember the last time a man had affected her this way. This wasn't just the 'let's have sex' kind of feeling she'd had all those years ago. Or the 'let's perform the marriage ritual' that sex with John had been like.

No, if she wasn't careful this could burn her heart. She had to put it out of her mind. Despite what Dino said about 'after this,' she was still just a responsibility to him. Someone to protect, part of the puzzle he was solving. She wasn't sure happy endings were in her future. She'd been riding the merry-go-round too many times.

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She tilted her head back against his shoulder just to absorb the feel of him and looked up at the night sky. It was so clear each star was plainly visible, a cluster of diamonds against black velvet. The moon was a perfectly drawn sliver hung against the dark backdrop of the night. The air was so quiet Jen could hear the soft lapping of the waves against the boat's hull, a comforting sound like a mermaid's kiss.

That silence was suddenly broken by the unmistakable whine of a helicopter. Jen looked up, startled, as Dino gently set her aside and picked up a large flashlight he'd placed on the deck close to him. He pointed it at the helicopter and flashed it twice, then directed a steady beam upwards.

"What's going on?" Jen asked, moving to stand next to him.

"Special delivery," he told her. "Watch for a package on the end of a rope."

In seconds she spotted a rope being lowered from the open door of the chopper with something large and dark at its end. Dino handed the flashlight to Jen as he reached upwards.

"Turn the light off," he said, and pulled the package toward him.

Now she could see it was a black duffel bag, tied to a hook on the end of the rope. Dino untied it, let it drop to the deck, then took the flashlight and blinked it twice again. The chopper lifted and took off into the darkness.

"What's in the bag?" she asked, her curiosity tickled. It wasn't every day she saw people get deliveries by helicopter.

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He grinned at her, his face lit only by one lantern on the deck. "If I told you a million dollars would you believe me?"

"No, really. What could someone drop onto this deck from a helicopter at this time of night?"

Dino motioned for her to follow him as he carried the bag down the steps into the salon. Plunking it onto the table in the dining area, he unzipped it and held it open for her inspection.

Jen's jaw dropped. "My God. You weren't kidding, were you?"

"I never kid." All humor had left his face. He zipped up the bag and took it into the bedroom. Jen followed behind him, watching as he opened the closet door, pushed clothes aside and pressed against the back wall of the closet. Immediately a panel slid sideways, revealing a three-foot square opening. Dino set the bag inside and slid the panel back in place.

"Let's go back topside," he told her.

"Can you tell me what the money's for? And where it came from?"

He took her hand and led her up the steps back to the deck. When they were seated on the cushions again he kept her hand in his, playing with the fingers.

"Whose money is that?" she asked again. "Come on, Dino. It's all about me, so don't keep me in the dark."

"It's for the man who's coming to meet us. He has information we need."

"Information that's worth this much money?" She was still dealing with the amount, astounded that anyone would think her safety was worth such an astronomical sum.

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Dino lifted her hand and kissed the knuckles. "How can you put a price on someone's life, *cara*?"

"B-but whose money is it? Where did it come from?"

"This particular batch came from Ethan since I couldn't exactly leave the boat and run to the bank. But as soon as we're back on shore I'll pay him back."

"A million dollars," she repeated the number in a soft voice. "Man. Whatever you guys do must pay really well."

"Our fees are commensurate with the risk," he told her. "Now. Enough about that. I need to turn off all the lights, even the small one here on deck." He set her hand aside and rose from the bench. "But first I'm going to move the boat just a little bit."

"Why? This is where you told that man you'd be."

"Trust nothing," he said, "and you'll live to make many more times that million dollars. Just sit still. I'll be right back."

He pressed the button to retract the anchor, then took the stairs to the cockpit two at a time. In seconds, she heard the dual Yamaha engines turn over with a smooth sound and the boat began to glide slowly through the water. Five minutes later, the engines were silenced and Dino was back on deck with her, lowering the anchor. He flipped more switches on a panel and just like that, the boat was shrouded in darkness.

When he sat down next to Jen again, he wrapped his arm around her and pulled her close to his body. The feel of his hard, muscular frame not only made her feel secure but it sent her hormones into overdrive. If only she she could stay like this forever.

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"Now what?" she asked.

"Now we wait."

Where before the night sounds had been soothing to her, now every noise made her nerves jump.

"Relax," Dino murmured in her ear, although she could feel a tautness in his own body. "Everything's going to be fine."

A tiny shiver skittered over her. "I just wish I knew how I ended up here in this mess. I thought I was getting such a safe life for Deanne and me."

"Things aren't always what they seem, Jen."

"And you?" she asked. "Are you what you seem?"

"I don't know. How would you describe me?"

"You mean besides good looking and too sexy to be legal?"

He laughed softly. "I think you need your eyes checked."

"Besides that, I see a man who lives on adrenaline, loves the chase, and is confident in his own abilities to always win. And happy not to have any attachments."

He was silent for so long she didn't think he was going to say anything. When he did, his voice had a strange quality to it.

"You'd be right. At least about half of it. The other half might have been true, too, before..." He let his voice trail off.

"Before what?"

But whatever answer he might have given disappeared as the faint noise of a speedboat disturbed the velvet silence of the night. Dino tensed, and as the sound grew louder, he shifted Jen away from him and moved to the brow. The gun he wore at the small of his back suddenly appeared in his hand.

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She wanted to ask if he greeted all his guests this way, but she didn't want to disturb his concentration.

With so little moonlight it was difficult to make out the shape of the boat as the hull cut through the water. It was little more than a dark blob against a darker background.

"Jen, go below." Dino spoke without looking at her.

Jen knew enough not to ask questions. She scrambled down into the salon, stationing herself where she was out of sight but could still see what was happening on deck. The engine whine grew louder and louder and, like Dino, she tensed, awaiting its arrival.

The sound of the explosion burst in her ears, the sonic waves it caused rocking the boat back and forth.

Oh God. What now?

She peered up the stairs and saw giant flames leaping into the night and debris raining down on the water.

"Stay the hell down there," Dino hollered.

The next moment, the Yamahas turned over again. Dino must have pushed the throttles full forward because the boat leaped ahead, bouncing along the waves caused by the explosion and racing at top speed away from the site.

* * * *

"Is it done?"

The man who'd planted the bomb gripped his telephone with sweat-slicked hands and tried to pull his shaking body together. "Van Dine is dead."

"And the man he was meeting with? Did you take care of him also?"

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The man hesitated, hating the news he had to deliver. "The bomb exploded while Van Dine's boat was still too far away. The boat I had following Van Dine said the driver of the big boat fired up his engines and got the hell out of there so fast my man didn't even have time to get on his tail."

"Shit. Double shit. How did that happen? Did the bomb exploded prematurely?"

The man wiped his other sweaty palm on his pant leg. "I think Van Dine's target moved his boat from the coordinates he was given."

"And just why in the hell would he do that? Did you do anything to make him suspicious?"

The man was sweating freely now. "No. He doesn't even know about me so that's not a possibility. I think he's just inherently suspicious and has some kind of built-in radar. I have a bad feeling about who that man was. A very bad feeling."

"And now he's gone. Out of reach." Silence hummed along the connection. "Do you think Van Dine gave him any hint of the information he had to pass along?"

"No. I don't think so. He wanted his money first."

"All right. I need to meet with my people. I'll get back to you."

"What shall I do?" *Something to redeem myself. Please. This wasn't a man one wanted to piss off.*

"Find out who the hell was on that other boat. I don't care who you have to pay or how much."

"I'll get on it right away." *Although just how in the hell I'm going to do that I have no clue.*

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"I'll call you tomorrow at the usual time, so you'd better get busy and have some answers for me."

* * * *

Jen huddled down in the salon for what seemed like an interminable time, afraid to come out on deck, afraid to stay where she was, wondering what the hell was going on. Finally Dino throttled the motors back and apparently put them on idle, because in a moment he was below deck beside her.

"It's okay," he soothed, prying her hands away from the door frame. "We're far enough away from the spot. Come up to the cockpit with me."

"But what...?"

"I'll tell you. Just come on up with me. Come on, baby. It's okay."

He soothed her as one would a child, and truthfully, at the moment that was exactly what she felt like. She clutched his hand as he guided her up onto the deck, then up the few steps to the cockpit. There were two captain's chairs up there, and she sank gratefully into one of them.

Dino checked the water around them, then turned to look at her. "We have to get moving again, but we'll be okay. I promise."

"What happened, Dino? That man's boat blew up."

Dino's face was etched with grim lines. "And if I hadn't moved ours earlier we'd have been splinters just like him."

"You knew," she whispered, swallowing the nausea rising in her throat.

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"No. Just ... wanted to be prepared. A little habit I've picked up over the years that's kept me alive and breathing. Any time someone else sets a meeting place, give yourself every edge possible."

"Who do you think it was?" She could barely raise her voice above a whisper.

"If it's the same people who killed your husband, they're a lot more dangerous than we've led ourselves to believe. This is no penny ante operation."

"Do you think they knew I was on the boat with you?" Her eyes were round with fear.

"No. I think it was an unfortunate coincidence. Whoever set the bomb and timer on Van Dine's boat obviously somehow knew he was meeting with someone. The bomb was meant to take out both boats. But now they'll be digging to find out who was on this boat and that's not good."

"My God." She rubbed her hands over her face as if trying to wipe away cobwebs. Or bad dreams. "I could get killed and they won't even know it's me. I don't know which scenario is worse."

Dino flashed a brief, reassuring grin. "Not if I have anything to do about it. All right. Sit here. We have to get moving."

"Back to Key West?"

"For the moment. I'm pretty sure whoever this was didn't know who Van Dine was meeting, so we've bought a little time." He laid one hand against her cheek. "Trust me, Jen. I'll take care of you. But we need to get moving. It won't take that long for them to check into Van Dine's past and come up

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with some names to follow. That means we need to get our own ducks in a row quickly. We need to go back to the house and do some homework."

He shoved both throttles forward and the big boat leaped through the water like a giant whale.

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Chapter Nine

Dino Brancuzzi was well aware that people in his line of work could have a short life expectancy if they didn't prepare for every eventuality. That's why both his home and marina had more hidden security alarms than the White House. He knew their anonymity couldn't last much longer. If these people were checking Jen's background and Van Dine's, it wouldn't be too long before the lines intersected at Ethan and then to him.

On the run back to Key West he'd called both Ethan and Mike, giving them a brief version of what happened, promising to call Ethan later on. Mike agreed to head to the marina and check things out before the boat docked. Jen's brain was spinning by the time all the arrangements were made.

"I feel as if I fell into the middle of a spy movie," she told Dino, trying to find a crumb of humor in the situation.

"Not so far from wrong, *cara*. Not so far from wrong."

It was close to two o'clock in the morning by the time Dino silently guided the big boat into the slip at the pier. Mike melted out of the shadows to help him tie up. Dino picked up the duffel bag with the money.

"I'd better get this back to Ethan ASAP."

"Want me to take care of it?"

"Not unless you're going back tonight. I'll lock it in the safe and see how he wants to handle this." He reached out a hand to help Jen onto the deck.

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"I checked out your house," Mike told him. "Nothing suspicious there, nor here at the marina, but you might want to do a look-see yourself."

Dino finished securing the boat and shook hands with Mike. "Need a place to crash tonight?"

"I'll find a room someplace in town. Not to worry."

"I was thinking you might want to stay on the boat. Kill two birds with one stone. You get a place to sleep and I get a sentry for the boat."

Mike grinned. "How can I pass up a deal like that?" He pointed to a small satchel leaning against a lamp post. "Brought my stuff just in case."

"Good. Listen, I'll call Ethan, but you'd better get hold of the others and tell them to put out every feeler they've got."

"I'm on it." Mike grabbed his bag and in seconds was on the boat, fading away into its dark interior.

Although the night air wasn't cold Jen felt chilled. She'd been trying to keep out of the way while the men talked, rubbing her arms to generate some body heat. Dino dropped the duffel at his feet and pulled her into his arms.

"Look at you," he said softly. "I should be shot. You've got to be exhausted, and I wouldn't doubt that shock is setting in, considering everything that's happened. Let's get you home and warmed up."

He scanned the entire pier area while they walked to the parking lot and climbed into the SUV. From the back seat he retrieved an old blanket.

"For emergencies," he told her. "This certainly qualifies. Wrap it around yourself. It's only a few blocks to the house

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but I want to take some of that chill out of your body. Come on. Do it."

Obligingly, she wrapped herself in the thick wool, but the cold she was feeling came from inside. She wondered if she'd ever forget all the death she'd seen in just a few days.

In his driveway, Dino locked the vehicle and set the alarm, then bundled Jen and the money into the house.

"Come sit down, *cara*," he told her, guiding her to the couch.

Jen was still shivering so hard she was afraid her bones would snap. She watched while Dino opened a cupboard and pulled out a familiar bottle and two glasses.

"Courvoisier!" How had he remembered? And why? "I can't believe you have a bottle."

"It's what we drank the last night we were all together." A flash of something—sorrow? regret?—crossed his face. "Call me a sentimental jackass. I thought, I don't know, maybe one day you'd stumble back into our lives and we'd crack this open." He wrestled the bottle open and poured some into each of the glasses, handing one to her. "Drink, *cara*. It will settle your nerves. I'll be right back."

He took the duffel with the money and disappeared into his bedroom. Jen sat huddled on the couch, cupping the glass in both hands and sipping at the warm brandy, the remembered flavor like a caress on her tongue. Eight years rolled away as if they were nothing. She'd almost forgotten that night in Ethan's sloppy apartment. He and Dino and the others were leaving the next morning. She'd been staying with Ethan during the week he was in town, but she'd known the merry-

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go-round ride was almost over. Ethan had itchy feet, moving from one relationship to another. That way he didn't have to give a piece of himself to anyone.

Dino had always been the quiet one. The solid one. Standing on the sidelines watching his friends make jackasses of themselves as they came down from their mission adrenaline rush. The caretaker, making sure they were always ready for their next assignments, that they didn't get their lives too entangled during their down time.

*Too bad he didn't get that message across to Ethan.
No! I don't wish that. I'd never have Deanne.*

She was still sitting there lost in thought when Dino came back into the room.

"Okay. Money's stashed away." His gaze scanned her face. "Color's a little better. Cognac helping?"

Jen nodded. "Dino, I don't ... that is..." She clutched the glass harder. "You could have been killed tonight. And it would have been my fault."

"Hey, hey, hey. Hold on, here." Before she knew what he was doing, he had scooped her up and settled in the chair with her on his lap. "I knew the risks going in. They're the same risks I take many times over. In different situations. That's why I try to think one step ahead of everyone."

"That's why you moved the boat."

"Yes. Did I think someone was trying to blow us up? No. But I didn't want us to be sitting ducks in their coordinates, either." He rested his cheek against her hair. The feeling was so comforting she wanted to cry.

"I'm sorry I dragged you into this."

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"Nobody dragged me into anything," he assured her. "I walked in with my eyes open, so get that out of your head. You were in just as much danger tonight, you know."

She pressed into the warmth of his chest. "I wish I could just make it all go away."

"We will, *cara*." His voice was soft. "I promise you that."

She forced herself to sit upright, away from the blessed cocoon of his arms. "So what happens now?"

"Now we try to backtrack Van Dine's movements and see who could have set the bomb. And find out else is on his tail."

"Can you do that from here?"

He tilted her chin up and smiled, a warm lazy smile that made her toes curl and her pulse ratchet up. "We can do anything from here. And don't forget, we're not alone. Now," he took the glass from her hand and set it down on a little table, "I prescribe a hot shower to go with the cognac while I try some magic with my laptop."

"Okay. But I'll just sit here a minute, if that's okay."

"No problem."

As the alcohol filtered its way through her body, it soothed her ragged nerves and melted the edges of the lump of ice that sat squarely in her stomach. Her eyes followed Dino as he set the laptop on the dining room table, booted it up and began to dance his fingers over the keyboard. In seconds he was absorbed in what he was doing.

She loved watching him, whatever he was doing. He was quietly confident in everything he did, as if he never expected to fail. And that competence settled her, gave her a feeling of stability that the past few weeks had almost destroyed.

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Why couldn't I pick someone like this? What would he say if he knew I have feelings growing for him now? Would this be just one more mistake in a very long line of them?

"I'm going to give Ethan a holler now," he told her, pausing for a moment to look at her. "Go ahead and take your shower. Then I'll take one and even though it's late, we can talk about what comes next."

"Okay." She sighed and put down her empty glass.
Too bad you won't come and shower with me.

* * * *

Mac looked at Grant sitting casually in the chair across from him. He didn't like having the man come to his office. It was imperative that no one see him here. Tonight, however, he'd had no choice. Meetings had kept him later than usual, so he'd waited until the floor was clear, then had Grant come up in the private elevator.

"Our man screwed up."

Grant snorted. "No kidding. You need to hire better help."

"Have you gotten any further with Jennifer Sutherland's background than the last time? My gut tells me whoever she's run to could be crossing paths with whoever was on that other boat tonight."

Grant lifted one shoulder in a half-shrug. "Yes and no."

Mac bit down on his frustration. "What does that mean? Either you did or you didn't?"

"I told you the last time. The people who knew her as Jennifer LaCroix seem much more worried about the people

we're looking for than anything we can do to them. I'm trying a different angle."

"And what's that?"

"I'm digging into Jack Smiley's background information."

Mac frowned. "Isn't he the guy..."

Grant dipped his head once. "Yup. That's the one. They have to be connected somehow. She disappears and all of a sudden this guy is sticking his nose in museum business. Too much of a coincidence."

Mac picked up a slim gold pen from his desk and began tapping it on the blotter. He wasn't a man usually given to nervous habits. He always believed they were 'tells', like in poker. But he was strung so tight at the moment with everything about to go in the crapper that he did it almost without thinking.

"All of this 'investigating' doesn't seem to be getting us any information. Time is passing, the artifacts are still missing, and my people are getting ready to receive the next shipment. We don't know who in the hell might get in the way and screw things up."

Grant uncrossed and recrossed his legs. "This isn't as simple as you'd like it to be. Whoever Mrs. Sutherland used to hang out with, I'd say they were either covert government agents or the closest thing to it. I might find the same thing with Smiley."

Mac dropped the pen. "If it's government, I have some contacts. I can use them to open files."

"Even confidential ones?"

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Mac nodded. "Yes. If they were mercenaries, there's always someone who will talk for the right amount of money. Find that person."

"Whatever you say." Grant unfolded himself from the chair. "And, yes, I know. You need answers yesterday."

* * * *

Charlie Waters switched his satellite phone to his other hand and hunkered down in the corner of the empty room. He'd been switching locations for his phone calls every day, just in case someone might be able to pick up the signal. He'd been assured the phone was secure, all transmissions scrambled, but Charlie didn't trust electronics worth a damn. He wanted to get this transaction taken care of before time ran out. If he was somehow caught with these particular antiquities in his possession, the thought of the tortures he would undergo made his blood chill. There was little Charlie was afraid of, but the people who could capture him frightened him to death. Literally.

Even more than the people he worked for. And that piece of international trash who'd been hanging around the café wasn't someone to ignore, either. Charlie had been very careful not to let any information out but the streets had ears and eyes, no matter how vigilant you were. Right now he wanted to get rid of his merchandise and go to ground until everything blew over.

"I need to get these pieces out of Cairo," he repeated into the phone. "And I need to do it now. What's the delay? You said it was all set up."

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"It is," came the response. "I just need to calm my shipper. He gets a little anxious, Charlie, with things of this magnitude. And we have to make doubly sure there's no way customs will get suspicious."

"Well, make it damn snappy, you hear? If I get caught, you'll go down with me."

"If you get caught I'll make sure you're dead before you can open your mouth." The message was delivered in a tight voice. "Now give me two more days. That's all I need."

"I'll call you the same time tomorrow. And you'd better have it all set up by then."

He clicked off with such viciousness he almost cracked the button. Who the hell did these people think they were, taking chances with his life? He had a package that people would kill for. *Had* killed for. And they were jerking him around.

Okay. Two days, then he'd find someone else to sell the stuff to. Someone with as much ready cash as these people. There was suddenly too much chatter on the streets for his liking. He needed to get this over and done with and find a secure hiding place until the heat was off.

He made his way back to his hiding place where his precious goods were hidden, taking care to make sure no one followed him. Up and down twisting streets, one minute hiding in the shadows, the next with an air of nonchalance. Always with an eye on everyone around him.

He breathed a sigh of relief when he reached his destination and checked on the safety of the goods. Settling himself in a comfortable position, he made sure his gun was

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cocked and loaded, set the alarm on his watch and closed his eyes. Just an hour or two, that's all he could allow himself.

* * * *

"This is a bigger plate of spaghetti than we figured, E."

Dino had just finished giving Ethan the details of the evening and his impressions of Van Dine's phone call.

"You're just lucky you and Jen didn't turn out to be the spaghetti," Ethan grunted.

"Always hedge your bets, I say. In any event, between what happened tonight and some emails I'm getting back, I have the feeling this is more than just your usual traffic in stolen antiquities. And that whoever killed Sutherland is a lot more powerful than we've been thinking."

"Do you think they know Van Dine was meeting you?"

"Not yet, but if they have the connections I think they do, they'll find out soon enough. That's what worries me. I've got Mike on the boat tonight and I brought Jen back to the house. But I'm thinking tomorrow when he leaves, we'll move back onto the water and stay there for a while. I can change locations whenever I want to and I'm not a sitting duck."

"I'm calling in some favors, too. Between us there aren't many corners we can't reach into. We need to pool our information tomorrow and see what's what. But I agree that this is a lot more than Jennifer believed. And more than we thought. If these people can reach around the world, there's a lot of power here."

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"We need to pull out all the stops on this one, E. Dig up everyone still in the shadows. Full court press before the good guys wind up dead."

"On it. I'll call you back in the morning. And just send the money back with Mike tomorrow."

"Consider it done. Thanks."

Dino set the sat phone back on the table next to the open laptop and tapped another message into his secure email. Jen's soft voice behind him startled him. He hadn't heard the bathroom door open.

Keep your wits together, Brancuzzi.

"Still at it?"

"I think I'm done for the moment. I asked the questions. Now I need to wait for the answers." He closed the lid on the computer, turned and the sight of her nearly brought him to his knees. Freshly scrubbed from the shower, her damp blonde hair hung around her face in gentle curls. She had that soft-looking peach robe wrapped around her and belted at her slender waist. A little color had returned to her face but her weak smile belied the pain and fear in her eyes. Every nerve in his body stood at attention, including a few he'd rather keep hidden.

Oh, sweet Jesus. Don't let me lose my head here.

"Did I hear you speaking to Ethan?"

"Yes." He poured an inch of brandy into each of the glasses and handed one to her. "First of all, Deanne's fine. She went to bed tonight with no urging and she and Jamie seem to be bonding."

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Jen bit her bottom lip, a habit Dino found endearing. "Is she, you know, asking for me?"

"She was glad you'd spoken to her earlier. She just keeps asking if Ethan is sure you're all right. I said we'd call in the morning." He tipped his head toward the table. "Come sit down and we'll talk."

She sat down opposite him, shoving the sleeves of the robe up to her elbows. "You'll tell me everything, right? Whatever you find out?"

He nodded. "I don't see any good reason not to. The more you know the more you can help. And I don't want you to have to deal with any more surprises."

"Who was that man whose boat exploded? All you said earlier was he was someone who might have information for us." She focused her gaze on him. "Must be pretty important if it was worth a million dollars."

Dino leaned back in his chair, sipping the aged brandy. As fragile as Jennifer LaCroix looked, he knew she could handle whatever truth he needed to tell her.

"His name was Martin Van Dine. He made his living buying and selling information, sometimes carrying out the odd assassination, insinuating himself into trouble spots to see how he could capitalize on them."

"Sounds like a sweet guy."

"He and I have a history that goes way back. I ... did him a favor one time. Not voluntarily. He owed me big time. I called him because if anyone could find out who's behind this antiquities business, it was Van Dine."

"So what do you think happened?"

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Dino snorted. "I think he got overconfident and careless." He saw Jen's hand tremble slightly as she lifted her glass to take another sip. "And someone killed him? Just like that?"

"In his line of business, killing is an everyday activity. But this is a little over the top even for Van Dine's enemies. I think what he had to tell us was worth whatever it took to get rid of him."

Jen's eyes were locked on his again, and she tightened her hands on her glass. "This is a little more than just a stolen antiques ring, isn't it."

He knew she wasn't asking a question. "Yes. I think it is. There's something about the people, the artifacts, or both that's got people on a killing spree."

"What did Ethan say?"

"He's got people on it and so have I. It's time to start calling in favors."

"I just wish I could figure out where John would have hidden whatever it is they're looking for. We could give it back and get rid of them."

Dino shook his head. "We're way past that, *cara*. We're in some deep shit here. Whenever we find out who's behind all of this, we turn them over to the proper people and get the hell away from them." He swallowed the last of his drink and stood up. "Meanwhile, we need to get some sleep. I have a feeling tomorrow's going to be a busy day."

Jen swallowed the last of the cognac, rinsed her glass and turned to go toward her room, but stopped.

"Dino, thank you for everything. No matter what happens, I'll never be able to thank you enough."

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Oh, yes. You could if I weren't so determined to be a gentleman.

He turned out the small light in the kitchen and headed to his own room. Remembering the look of fear in Jen's eyes, he lit a small wall sconce in the hallway so the house wouldn't be completely dark. In his dark room he dropped to the side of the bed, trying to get the image of Jen in her robe out of his mind.

Up to now every gesture, even when she'd nestled in his arms on the boat, had been couched to express comfort and reassurance. That wasn't what he was feeling now. Not at all. And Jennifer LaCroix had enough problems in her life without some horny man crawling all over her. That wasn't part of his missions, and he *always* kept to the mission plan.

Finally he stripped down to his boxers and crawled under the covers. Closing his eyes, he willed himself to stop thinking about the woman in the next room and how badly he wanted her.

* * * *

Jen tossed and turned as if someone had thrown her in a spin dryer. There was no place in the bed where she could seem to get comfortable. She wondered if sleep was eluding Dino as well. He'd been more than the perfect gentleman, but they'd have to be idiots not to sense the thread of sexual tension tightening around them.

As chilled as she'd been before, now her body felt warm, her skin prickly with heat. The sleep shirt she'd pulled on, soft as it was, felt harsh against her skin. She pulled and tugged

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at it, finally yanking it off and tossing it to the foot of the bed. Again she tried to find a comfortable spot, deliberately pushing the thoughts of Dino from her mind. With the perilous situation she was in, sex was the last thing she should be thinking about.

She tried to conjure up images that would blunt the urges in her body and at last, from sheer exhaustion, dropped into a restless sleep.

It was hot. Very hot. Flames were racing toward her, licking the air around her. She ran as fast as she could but the fire was outrunning her. The closer it got the more the heat consumed her until it was on her, wrapping itself around her.

Where was Dino? Why wasn't he helping her?

She screamed his name as loud as she could, but the fire was pressing in on her, as if it had grown hands and was gripping her.

"Jen. Jennifer. Wake up."

"No!" she screamed. "Hot. Don't burn me."

"Come on, Jen."

Hands shook her, finally pulling her away from the heat and flames. She forced her eyes open, her consciousness reaching for the voice. Dino was gripping her shoulders, shaking her.

"Wake up, Jen. It's only a dream."

Her eyes widened and she glanced around, her face still taut with panic. Then she saw the reassuring setting of the bedroom. The bedside lamp had been turned on, chasing away the darkness. Her heart was racing and she was shaking

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so badly she had to lean into Dino for support. He pulled her against his chest and held her for a long time, until her pulse approached something close to normal and her breathing was less ragged.

She lifted her gaze to his face, saw the worry in his eyes. "I did it again, huh?"

His hand smoothed her hair. "It's all right. Tonight would have given anyone nightmares under the best of circumstances. And this definitely doesn't fit that category."

"I'm sorry I woke you."

"That's okay. I can go back to sleep easily. It's an old trick I learned years ago. Sleep where and how you can."

They sat that way for another long moment, silence settling over them like a mantle. Jen looked down, feeling Dino's hair-roughened chest against her naked flesh and quickly yanked the sheet up between them. The look in his eyes told her he was just as aware of their situation as she was and doing his best to ignore it. Her cheeks burned and she wondered if she could just pull the covers over her head and hide.

"Don't worry," he joked. "I have half-naked women throw themselves at me all the time."

She choked on her laugh and inched away from him.

His hands gentle on her shoulders, Dino eased her back against the pillows and pulled the blanket up to cover her as well. His hands smoothed her tangled hair away from her face.

"Okay?" he asked. "Are you all right if I go back to bed now?"

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Jen swallowed, gathering her courage. "Dino?"

"Yes?"

"I-I'd sleep a lot better if you'd lie down here with me."

She closed her eyes, not wanting to see rejection in his face if he made up some excuse.

His hands tightened on her skin and he leaned forward to kiss the top of her head before answering. "Jen, we're both adults here, and we're not stupid. You know as well as I do something's cooking with us. If I lie down with you, we'll be doing a lot more than sleeping."

Now she raised her eyes to his, shaken by the heat she saw burning in them. She wet her lips with the tip of her tongue. "O-Okay. Sleep is overrated, right?"

"Are you sure?" He cupped her chin with one hand, studying her face and her eyes. "I don't want you to think you have to do this because..."

"I want to do this because I want to do it. Okay?"

His mouth turned up in a slow, lazy smile. "Okay, *cara*. Very much okay."

She was clutching the covers where he'd tucked them at her chin, covering her nakedness, but Dino gently turned them back.

"No hiding, *cara*. I want to see you. I've been dreaming about this body since we got to Key West. Don't deny me the pleasure."

She lay there trying to relax as his eyes traveled over every inch of her body. She'd been naked in front of men before. Too many men, she thought regretfully. But with Dino everything seemed brand new. She felt almost virginal.

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He stripped off the boxers he'd worn to bed, the warm olive of his skin golden in the light of the lamp. He was rock-hard everywhere, carved like a sculpture, the muscles in his thighs corded. His erection, proud and swollen, rose from a thick nest of dark curls.

Jen wet her lips again, in her mind already feeling the thickness of him inside her.

He lay down on the sheet with her, pushing the covers further away with his foot, and his nearness made her pulse leap. His fingers traced a careful line over her cheekbones and down the curve of her jaw, stroking the column of her neck. His hand grazed the swell of her breasts and tested the weight of their fullness, his thumbs rasping against nipples already hardened and demanding. As light as a feather he explored every inch of her abdomen, one finger circling the indentation of her navel, then tracing the crease of the line where hip and thigh met.

A flick of his hand separated her thighs and he caressed the soft inner skin. His eyes never left her body, first following the path of his hand, then locking on hers. She knew he was taking his time to learn every part of her, every inch of her body, and the anticipation of what would come next had her drawn tight as a bow.

"Relax," he murmured. "It's all right. Just let yourself feel."

She swallowed and unclenched fists she didn't even know she'd made.

"Close your eyes, Jen." His voice was low and seductive. "Just close your eyes and let me make you feel good."

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She closed them on an exhale of breath. Every other sense leaped to life. She caught the scent of him, cologne and sun and sweat and male. The sound of his voice, like warm chocolate, covering her with words of arousal. And his touch! Holy mother! Just the briefest caress sent her pulses leaping and her blood heating. He touched her everywhere—the backs of her knees, the insides of her ankles, across the line where her mound began.

By the time his fingers threaded through the soft curls of her sex she was ready to scream. He didn't have to urge her to open her legs wider for him. They did so automatically, her hips doing a little dance to signal what she wanted.

"Slow, *cara*. I don't want to rush this. You're like a treasure that I want to explore one layer at a time."

His head lowered to hers and when he kissed her heat shot through her. His tongue was a wild thing in her mouth, tasting everywhere, flicking against her own tongue, then scraping the roof of her mouth. His lips were like rough satin, bruising in their intensity. A kiss that went on forever.

His mouth moved over her cheek and he trailed his tongue along her jaw and the column of her neck. At the hollow where her pulse beat so rapidly he nipped and nibbled, then placed a sucking kiss there almost like a brand. She felt herself being devoured, and all the time his hand stroked, petted, teased at her flesh.

By the time his fingers separated her folds and gathered her slick cream she was half out of her mind with wanting. He stroked her labia before moving his hand and brushing lightly

against the top of her clit. Jennifer jerked at his touch and a soft moan vibrated in her throat.

"So wet," he crooned. "So hot. My God, you'll burn me alive."

His erection pressed against the side of her thigh like a thick, heated shaft. She tried to reach down for it but he captured both of her hands with one of his, his fingers like warm manacles around her wrists. He pulled her hands over her head, stretching her out, and his fingers returned to her heated core. When he slid first one, then two of them inside her she felt her inner muscles clamp down on them.

His fingers curled inside her, reaching for her sensitive places. A guttural sound rolled from her mouth and her arousal flooded his hand.

Dino laughed softly. "Hit a sweet spot, did I?"

"Mmm," was all she could manage, hitching her hips again.

Her eyes were still closed, sensation piling on sensation, swamping her. His fingers were everywhere, inside her, slipping in and rubbing her sensitive flesh, pushing her higher and higher.

"I want to touch you," she whispered.

"Next time. I'm too close. You do wicked things to me, *cara*."

"No, you're the one who's the devil," she panted. "Please, please, please."

She opened her eyes when she felt him move over her, releasing her wrists and positioning himself at her entrance. When he entered her she raised her legs to take him deeper, locking her ankles behind his back.

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"Oh, God," he breathed. "I must have died because this can only be heaven."

And then he began to move, a slow roll and thrust of his hips until she wanted to scream for him to hurry, hurry, hurry. But he took his time, pulling out until only the tip of his shaft was inside her, then plunging fully inside again, burying himself to the hilt, the softness of his sac slapping against her buttocks.

A tight coil low inside her began to unwind, stretching, reaching through her. Her blood was racing and her heart was pounding. Dino leaned back, his shaft barely inside her wet channel, put his big hands under her buttocks and lifted her to him. When he plunged again she felt him all the way to the tip of her womb. A thought flashed through her with the swiftness of lightning—*we fit. God, we fit so good.* Then she was lost again in the sensual journey he was taking her on, nothing existing but this man and the feel of him inside her.

His pace quickened and she matched it, their rhythm perfectly coordinated. Their eyes were still locked together and she swore he could see into her soul. She could feel her orgasm building, her nerves sparking, her body reaching, reaching, reaching.

When it exploded it hit every part of her, spasms wrenching her body, her liquid heat flooding the thick shaft inside of her pulsing its own cream. Her inner muscles milked him as she dug her heels into his back, pulling him as tight against her as she could. Her body shook and shuddered as the climax pulsed endlessly.

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Her arms and legs were still locked around him when he dropped his head to her shoulder. The only sound in the room was the ragged sounds of their breathing and the thundering of their heartbeats, which Jen swore were louder than drums.

She had no idea how long they lay there like that, but eventually they began to untangle themselves, forcing strained muscles to move and bodies to shift.

Dino shifted to lie beside her, his hand pushing her hair away from her damp face, his touch so tender she wanted to cry.

When he cleared his throat a tiny pin stuck her heart.

Uh oh. No, not the speech. Not now.

"Jen, listen."

She pressed two fingers to his lips. "Not tonight. If you're sorry I don't want to know about it until tomorrow."

He captured her hand and dragged it away from his mouth. "We have to do something about that attitude of yours. That's so far from what I want to say it isn't even in the same book. This was a life-altering experience. You know I've had a lot of women. I can't deny it. But they were just preparation for you. It was never like this before. Not with anyone."

She felt heat rise on her cheeks. "You mean it?"

He dusted a light kiss on her mouth. "More than anything. But Jen, I didn't use my brain. Or any protection."

"Oh." For a moment she wondered what it would be like to be pregnant with his child. To share the experience. But not with her life in its current mess. She counted backwards in her head. "I think we're okay. I was taking birth control pills

but obviously that's been the last thing on my mind the past week or so."

"If you do get pregnant..."

She turned her head away. "I don't want another Ethan Caine situation."

"Nor do I." He brushed gentle fingers across her forehead and stroked her cheek. "There's so much I want to say to you. Tell you. But first I want to make sure I've taken care of the devils on your tail. This isn't the sex talking, Jen. I really do want to talk about a future. With you and Deanne."

She felt tears leaking from her eyes. Dino leaned over and caught them with his tongue.

"It will be all right, Jen. I'm going to take care of this. I promise you." He tucked her against him and pulled the covers over them both. "Meanwhile I think we need to get what sleep we can in what's left of the night."

Jen tucked her head on his shoulder and snuggled her butt up against him. In seconds she was asleep, and this time she didn't dream.

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Chapter Ten

They were gathered in the den again, and the expression on their faces could best be described as grim. Henry had poured drinks for everyone, sensing they would need the cushion of alcohol when they heard what Mac had to say. When he was seated behind the desk, he looked at Mac and said, "Okay. Let's have it."

Mac took a slow sip of his drink before he spoke. This was not a conversation he'd been looking forward to. He'd just spoken to his man in Florida again, with frustrating results. Everything was falling apart and he knew he'd be the scapegoat. He got an extra share of the money for handling situations like this, and he couldn't believe how this one had gotten away from him. He hated being the bearer of bad news, and there was nothing good about what he had to say tonight.

"I wondered if we shouldn't have everyone here for this meeting," he began. "This affects them, too."

"That's for me to decide. Let's hear what you have to say first."

Mac jiggled the ice cubes in his drink. "All right. Here it is. This whole thing is turning into one big goat-roping disaster," he began, "and to say I'm unhappy about it is an understatement."

"What's happened now? You're the go-to man, the mechanic who fixes everything. You've told us over and over again there isn't a problem you can't handle."

"Let's start with the two missing pieces," he said. "We're all aware of their origin, as well as that of the four others Charlie Waters has for us. We're not dealing with a few pieces from some archeological dig." He took another sip of his drink. "This is a hot topic everywhere, and somehow it seems word of our little ... organization ... and our latest acquisitions has leaked."

"Leaked?" Shock flashed across Henry's face. "But how? We've been so careful."

"Maybe Charlie isn't as careful as he has been. Maybe there are just more people with eyes on this situation. Maybe too many governments have turned up the heat. It could be any or all of those."

"I can't believe Charlie would be so careless. Take such a risk. Not with what's at stake."

Patsy, her artificially enhanced ash blonde hair slicked back into a French braid frowned at him, creasing her impeccably made up face. "We've used him for a long time. He's always known enough to keep his mouth shut before."

Mac looked slowly from one to the other. "That's only an assumption I'm making. I'm checking everything. Remember, we all knew from the beginning how risky it was being involved with these particular artifacts."

"But that's why they're so valuable," she argued. "Why we can get so much money for them. The sale of the antiquities from—"

Mac held up his hand. "No names, all right?"

"Wherever he obtained them will set us up for life."

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Monica snorted. "Like we already aren't? Face it. We're just greedy."

"Our items might not even be part of the big search going on," Patsy protested.

Mac's lips thinned. "Guess again. These items are hotter than your fancy barbecue. If we aren't careful we could all end up in a federal prison."

"Aren't you being a little melodramatic?" she asked. "We all discussed these particular items and agreed they were worth the risk."

"That was before word of our group somehow got out on the street," Mac pointed out.

Monica took a large swallow of her drink. "I think you're exaggerating. We're very careful with the way we process these. There's never been a whisper of our operation anywhere. What makes you think there is now?"

Mac leaned forward. "Let's go back to John Sutherland and the two missing pieces. We ended up ... disposing of him before we got any answers. And Jennifer Sutherland has gone to ground somewhere with friends who are keeping her very well-concealed."

"What does that have to do with the leak?" Patsy demanded. "Was John peddling information as well?"

"And have you found out about his wife's friends yet?" Henry asked, an acerbic note in his voice. "How hard can it be to trace a little nobody like her?"

Mac snorted. "A little nobody? You'll change your mind when I tell you what I learned. And no, I don't think John was

the leak, but his wife may be more involved in this than we think."

"I knew it," Patsy smirked. "I knew that little bitch had a hand in this."

Mac shook his head. "That's not what I meant. She's linked in a different way." He got up, refilled his glass and sat down again, tension in every line of his body. Mac didn't back away from too many things in his life, but all the information he'd discovered in the past twenty-four hours was giving him serious heartburn. "Coincidence is everything in life, you know. I've always believed that. Jennifer Sutherland, nee LaCroix, and the late Jack Smiley who was nosing around the museum, had a friend in common." He paused. "You have no idea whose arms I had to twist or the favors I had to call in to get this information. And I don't say that lightly. None of this is what it looked like at first."

"What do you mean?" Monica wanted to know.

"I mean the lady in question has some serious connections, the kind people don't talk about."

"Well, spit it out," Patsy snapped at him.

"Before she married Sutherland, our little Jennifer hung out with a group of people who worked off and on for various government agencies before striking out on their own. Agencies that operate well below the radar. Do you know what that means?"

Everyone stared at him. Finally, Henry took a deep swallow of his drink and answered him. "Her friends were covert agents who were probably also assassins."

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Mac nodded. "Of course, the government doesn't call them assassins, and in their line of work that's probably correct. They do a job, using whatever means it takes. And they've handled some really nasty people over the years."

"Are they still working for the government?" Henry asked. "If so, how did you get information about them? I thought that stuff was buried deeper than Davy Jones."

Patsy twisted her glass in nervous fingers. "I want to know exactly how involved that little bitch *is* with them, anyway."

"And how did you get this information?" Monica demanded.

Mac held up a hand. "One at a time. Please. To answer the first question, they all met at some party where the men were between missions and she became what you might call an item with one of them. That arrangement lasted for quite a while. The man is Ethan Caine, and he's not someone you want to get on the wrong side of."

"We've dealt with some pretty nasty people in this business," Patsy said. "How much worse can they be?"

Mac's lips thinned in a grim line. "This guy has worked for more alphabet agencies than you can imagine. His file is buried so deep that only some heavy blackmail got it opened for me. None of his enemies are alive to talk about him. He's not someone you want to screw around with."

"Is he still with the government?" Henry asked.

Mac shook his head. "He runs a security training school that even Uncle Sam uses. He also takes contracts now for both the United States and high profile corporations. Even some small foreign countries. This is the man who set Jack Smiley on us."

"And what does that have to do with the information leak about us?" Patsy asked again.

Mac gave a humorless laugh. "Like I said, coincidence is everything in life. It came to my attention, almost accidentally, that a scumbag named Martin Van Dine picked up the tidbit and was getting ready to peddle it. He's a man who's tempted fate once too often and needs to disappear. That takes money, so he needed a buyer who could come up with a lot of cash. The man I had on him learned he was meeting someone to do just that. And I believe the person he was meeting is somehow connected to Ethan Caine."

"What makes you think that?" Monica's brows drew together as she sipped from her glass.

"Van Dine got caught in a mission that Caine was leading years ago. The only reason he's alive today is because one of Caine's men had to make a choice. Someone else drew the short straw and Van Dine was able to get away."

"And?" Henry prompted.

"And, it's entirely possible that Caine was reaching out to Van Dine in an effort to find information that would get us off Jennifer's back at the same time Van Dine was looking for a buyer. One of them could be hiding Jennifer Sutherland while they look for a way to take us down."

"Well." Monica made a sour face, but the hand holding her glass trembled. "That certainly puts us in the middle of the cesspool."

No one else spoke for a very long time. Finally, Henry lifted his glass, looked at it, and put it down without taking a sip. "I guess getting drunk isn't going to solve our problem."

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How do we find this man and check to see if the woman is with him?"

Mac shrugged. "I don't think she's with Caine."

"Why not?"

"Because a little arm-twisting gets his location and he knows it. He wouldn't put her in such a vulnerable position, no matter how secure his facility is. But I do think she may be with one of his friends. The one who was meeting with Van Dine."

"Why didn't we stop them and get rid of them?" Patsy asked.

"We did, but we almost made a mistake. My man set a bomb rigged to blow on Van Dine's boat out on the water. However, he didn't know we wanted the woman alive, and he nearly blew up both boats."

"Jesus." Henry expelled a long breath through his teeth. "That would have been a damned disaster. So we got rid of Van Dine but where's the other boat? And do we happen to know which friend of Caine's is involved?"

"We're making a good guess." Mac looked at each person again before resuming his report. "I have someone running down the list of the men Caine had on his missions with him to see who did or does have access to a large boat. And *that* information cost a bundle, you can believe."

"But we've lost the trail for now," Monica said into the silence.

"Only for the moment. My source couldn't tell me who Van Dine was meeting, but I think it's just a process of elimination."

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"You'd better make sure we're well-covered in this," Henry said. "We can't afford any more mistakes."

"You're right. Finding her is our first priority," Mac said. "But we might want to forego this next shipment. Cool it for a while. Maybe even take what we've got and shut it down. All of this is beginning to unravel."

"No." Patsy slammed her glass down on the coffee table. "Absolutely not. This may be our last strike and I for one don't want to pass up all that money. We have buyers waiting. I say let's do it." She looked around the room. "Anyone disagree?"

No one said a word. Finally, Mac set his glass down and unfolded himself from his chair. "I think this is a big mistake, but I'm only one person. I guess I'd better ramp up the efforts to find the woman. And keep in mind. It might be more to our advantage just to dispose of her than worry about those two pieces. Think about that. Someone needs to get this message to the others. I'll call you when I have news."

The others in the room watched silently as he let himself out.

* * * *

Jen came out of sleep slowly, eyes still closed as she held on to the remnants of the pleasant feeling clinging to her. Burrowing into the pillow, she tugged the covers up to her chin.

The bed next to her dipped and a hand whispered against her cheek.

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"I saw you move, *cara*." He smiled. "Time to wake up. We slept late, although not without good reason. But we have much to do."

His voice reached through the fog of her sleep and she pushed her lids up. The first thing she saw was Dino's sexy, handsome face inches away from hers, his mouth curved in a smile that made her bones to turn to water. Her cheeks warmed as she remembered the night before—or was it early in the morning?—and the passion they'd shared. A tiny thread of panic grabbed her as she wondered what he would say. How he'd react. How things might change between them, good or bad.

But when he leaned down and kissed her any lingering fear vanished. His mouth caressed hers, brushing against her lips, and his tongue traced the edges before plunging inside. She pulled her arms out from underneath the covers and wound them around his neck, answering him with heat of her own.

He lifted his head and she could see desire flaming in his eyes.

"If I had my way we'd stay in bed all day," he told her. "But we have work to do. And Jen?"

"Yes?"

"Put this in your memory bank. Last night wasn't a mistake. Nor was it just exercise to relieve physical tension. I don't have one moment of regret and I hope you don't, either. This is a beginning for us, *cara*. We're going to get this situation fixed and go on from there."

She stared up at him, trying to read behind his eyes. "You don't know how much I want to believe that."

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"Then do. Because I mean it. Now." He yanked the covers back.

Her nipples puckered as the air hit them and his eyes darkened at the sight.

"I can't function without coffee," she told him, grabbing the quilt away from him. "Give me five minutes to shower."

"Five minutes and the coffee will be ready."

She almost hated to shower, to wash away the traces of their loving the night before. She loved the scent of him on her skin, the imprint of his hands and mouth. The feel of his body. She hastily scrubbed and rinsed, knowing that if she let mind wander, she'd be lost in daydreams.

Good as his word, Dino had coffee ready when she found him in the tiny kitchen alcove. He handed her a filled mug, placing a brief kiss on her forehead.

"Drink up. We have some brain work to do. I'm expecting two phone calls, then we'll talk."

As if on cue, the sat phone buzzed. He picked it up and clicked the button. "Yeah, Ethan. Got anything for me?"

Jen watched him as he listened to whatever Ethan was saying, his face as usual giving nothing away. She had to bite her tongue to keep from asking about Deanne. When he nodded once more and handed the phone to her she nearly tore it out of his hands.

"Mommy?"

She dropped back into the chair, her legs too weak to hold her at the sound of her daughter's voice.

"Hi, sweet baby." She forced the tears out of her throat. "How are you?"

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"I'm good, Mommy."

Her voice sounded so relaxed Jennifer's heart squeezed. The edge of fear was still there, but in two days Ethan and Lisa had apparently managed to work some kind of miracle.

"Are you having fun with the Caines?"

"Uh huh. They told me you're doing something really important so we don't have to be afraid anymore. And that Mr.... Mr.... "She paused and Jen could hear someone coaching her. "And that Dino is taking care of you."

"That's right, sugar. He's a very nice man."

"Jamie says he's his daddy's best friend. Did you know that?"

Jen choked back the tears that threatened again. "Yes. Yes, I did."

"Okay. I gotta go. Mr. Ethan wants to talk to you."

"Mr. Ethan?" she asked, when Ethan's rough but warm voice came over the phone.

"Well, I had to come up with something between Mr. Caine and you-know-what. It was Lisa's idea and works for now."

"How is she, Ethan? Really?"

"Missing you, obviously. But all things considered, I'd say she's pretty good. Jamie's keeping her occupied and Lisa's going to have her baking cookies this afternoon."

"I-I don't quite know how to thank you," she stammered.

"Jen." His voice dropped. "She's a great kid. You've done a wonderful job with her."

"Thanks." She was surprised at the praise. "I hear a 'but' coming."

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"When we get things cleared up, I'd like to find a way to tell her the truth about us. About me."

The knot in her stomach tightened. This was the chance she'd taken when she brought Deanne to him. And after all he was doing, how could she say no?

"I think we can discuss this. I just want to do it without traumatizing her." She swallowed, Should she say anything to him about the future?

As if sensing her confusion, Dino sat down opposite her and took her hand. "Go with it," he whispered. "Whatever it is, we'll handle it together."

She blew out a breath. "Okay. We'll do it when this is over. But Ethan?"

"Yeah?"

"I may be introducing another person into her life, too."

Ethan was silent for a moment, then he chuckled. "I always did think Dino would be better for you than me. Good luck to both of you. Put the lucky bastard back on the phone."

Jen handed the phone back to Dino, this time letting the tears run unchecked down her cheeks. She was barely aware of the rest of the conversation until Dino hung up and began blotting her face with a paper towel.

"Are those good tears or bad?" he asked, his voice uninflected.

"Good tears." She sniffled, then took a healthy swallow of coffee. "Okay. I'm together. What's going on?"

"Someone's been checking into Jack Smiley's background," he told her. "And getting unauthorized access to files that should be dead and buried. Ethan's on a rampage."

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"But who can be doing this?"

"I can tell you it's someone with enormous clout, *No one* should be able to see this stuff. Or even know we exist."

Jen had no doubt about that. She remembered from years ago how highly classified everything about Ethan, Dino and the others had been. They joked about it but one night Ethan had explained why none of them could ever tell her anything about anything. Apparently they still had those contacts.

"Can Ethan do anything about it?"

"He's flying to Washington today to find out. He twisted some arms to get people to meet with him."

"Wait. If he leaves the house what about Deanne? And Ethan's family?"

"No problem. He's got two of his best men staying in the house with extra guards scheduled all around the perimeter. And he'll be back tonight."

"Have you heard from any of your sources?" She knew he'd reached out to some people he thought could help him, people who wouldn't connect him to anything.

He got up to refill his mug. The timer on the oven dinged and he pulled out a tray of biscuits, dumped them on a plate and brought them to the table with a jar of jam.

"Frozen but they aren't bad," he told her. "With butter and jam you can hardly tell them from real ones. The jam's great. A friend of mine makes it. I promise you honest food later on." He slathered some jam on a biscuit, took a bite and leaned back. "Okay. I guess we've stumbled into a hornet's nest. A really bad one."

"What do you mean?"

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"My information is coming out of the Middle East, and—"

"Wait." Jen put her mug down. "Wait, wait, wait. The Middle East? Are you kidding me?"

"Not at all. My sources tell me that's where Van Dine picked up his information. The artifacts John Sutherland skimmed for himself are so hot they'll burn your hands if you ever touch them."

"I don't understand. Aren't all stolen antiquities hot, as you say?" Absently she picked up a biscuit, spread some of the jam on it and took a small bite.

"These are incendiary. Do you remember all the ink in the newspapers about the museum in Baghdad being looted of thousands of antiquities and art?"

She nearly choked on her biscuit. "Baghdad? These pieces are stolen from Iraq? Holy shit."

"Indeed."

She chased the biscuit with coffee. "I can't believe John would be involved with something like that. Are you positive about this?"

Dino grunted. "Believe me. My source is unimpeachable. He knows if he lied to me he wouldn't be breathing much longer."

And that certainly hit her like a bucket of cold water. She dropped her biscuit. "Oh."

"Oh, Lord. Jen. Hey, I'm sorry, *cara*." He reached over and put his hand over hers. "Just an expression. Okay?"

She forced herself to smile. She knew it was more than that, but then, she knew that about him. About all of them. She also knew they never killed except out of necessity.

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"It's okay. Better him than us, right?" She gave him a shaky grin. "So what did he tell you, exactly?"

"That there are still more than four thousand artifacts missing from the museum. That a street dealer in Cairo has somehow managed to score some of them. A windfall for him, by the way, since his usual treasure is stolen objects from archeological digs."

"How does this fit in with John and with the man who was killed?"

"Van Dine was a man who dealt in information. He scouted for it and sold it to the highest bidder. He didn't care who." He picked up another biscuit. "What my contact says Van Dine learned this time was that there's a huge ring in especially hot stolen antiquities operating in the Midwestern United States. And that their most recent acquisitions were part of the items looted from the Iraqi museum."

For a moment Jen thought she would faint. "And this is what John was involved in?"

Dino nodded. "I'd say so. Especially because of the location of the organization."

"Did ... Does your friend know who these people are? Their names? Anything?"

"Not yet, but we're working on it. Here's the problem." He leaned forward. "While we're chasing them, they're chasing us. Apparently someone or more than one person in this organization has enough clout to dig up your past, connect you with Ethan and get his personnel file opened."

Her jaw dropped. "But that's illegal. I don't know much about what you guys did but I read the newspapers. Covert

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files are never supposed to be opened except by people with the appropriate authority."

"Yeah, well, it seems someone in their camp applied pressure to or paid off the right person. Ethan said he'd call us from Washington after his meeting with ... the person he's meeting with."

"So what do we do in the meantime?"

"We take all that information on the board you gave me the other night and see where we can go with it. We pull up the files on everyone on that list plus all their friends and associates and start digging through them one at a time." He reached over to the chair next to him and pulled up another laptop, setting it on the table. "I've got an extra one of these here. How computer literate are you?"

She grinned. "Are you kidding? I'm a graphic artist who does her own research. I could earn a merit badge in computers."

"Good. Then let's get to work."

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Chapter Eleven

This time they were meeting at a truck stop north of the city on I-75. Dressed in jeans and a sweatshirt, Mac blended in with the people huddled in booths or at the counter.

He was on his second cup of coffee when Grant slid into the booth opposite him.

"So where are we now?" he asked, stirring sweetener into the thick brew.

"I shook some trees in Washington and a bunch of leaves fell out. Very interesting leaves. How'd you like to go to Key West?"

Grant took a swallow of coffee. "Are you offering me a vacation?"

"Only if you get the job done. But you get to stop in Tampa, first." He slid a folder across the table. "Take a minute to look at what's inside here."

Grant idly stirred more sugar in his coffee as he flipped through the two photos and studied the information sheet. He looked up at Mac. "Where the hell did you get these?"

Mac gave him a humorless grin. "If I told you, I'd have to kill you. I gather you recognize them?"

"Hell, yes. In my other life on some of my side trips to places nobody talks about, I heard of them now and then. Nobody ever, ever said a word about them. They were the toughest of the tough."

"Does Caine know you?" Mac asked. "Would he recognize you? Or your name?"

Grant shook his head. "Why? You sending me into the lion's den?"

"Something like that. We think they're hiding our girl. My source says Dino Brancuzzi is Caine's closest friend. He has a marina in Key West. I've got someone checking it out right now but I don't think they've got her there. Too obvious, especially after the boat explosion. But he's got her somewhere and Caine or Brancuzzi know where."

Grant's lip curled in a sarcastic grin. "And you want me to just walk up to..." He flipped open the folder again, "Ethan Caine's front door and start asking questions? Why are we showing our hand like this? You know we'll getting nothing from anybody."

Mac shook his head. "I want to rattle their cage a little. Make them think we know more than we do. Force them to move her from wherever she is so we can get a chance at her. Come up with a good cover story. And after you talk to Caine, go to Key West and call this man." He handed over a slip of paper with a cell phone number on it. "I called him as soon as I got this information. He's been checking out Brancuzzi, seeing if anything's going on down there. Scoping out the situation for you. He'll fill you in on what's happening there."

"I hope he's good enough not to bumble around and raise any red flags."

"He's good," Mac snapped. "Don't worry about him. If Brancuzzi's there he'll hang out and wait for you. If he's not, my man will just be a tourist looking for a charter."

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"Do you seriously think we'll get anything out of these people?" he snorted. "These guys were in the game before you and I even heard about it. I'll be lucky if *I'm* not the one who disappears."

"That's not my intention."

"Then what is? It would help if I knew."

Mac leaned forward across the table and when he spoke his voice was so cold it could have frozen water. "John Sutherland helped himself to a couple of stolen antiquities that belong to my friends. It's everyone's bad luck that the two he chose could easily get whoever has them killed."

Grant looked at Mac quizzically. "Hotter than usual?"

"If these people—Caine and his friends or whoever has Jennifer Sutherland—find them first, a lot of people could get buried by the government. Or worse yet, handed over to a foreign country that would love to chop them up in pieces, just so Uncle Sam can save face. That's worth taking some chances. So you do whatever it takes to flush this woman out. And do it now." He leaned back. "You'll be well compensated, I promise you."

"Yeah, if I live."

"I wouldn't give this job to anyone else. You've played the same game these men have. You'll know what to do. You've done well for me so far. Don't let me down now."

"And I suppose you want the results yesterday."

"You got that right."

Grant drummed his fingers on the folder for a moment, then picked it up and slid out of the booth. "I'm on my way."

* * * *

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Jen was sure she had no appetite, what with everything that was happening, but the frozen biscuits were surprisingly good, especially with the homemade jam. They nibbled at them while they worked silently on the laptops. Dino had taken the list of names she'd rattled off to him that first night, along with the notes he'd made later on her opinions of them. He took the top half and gave her the rest.

"It's time to dig a little deeper into these people. Find out which ones of them are involved, because you can bet at least half of them are."

"Is that what your friends have told you?" She knew he'd been getting secure emails from his contacts he reached out to.

"Actually only the first layer of information has been cracked. We need to dig beneath that. Check their bank accounts. Their cash flow. Their telephone records. Anything that will help us connect the dots."

Jen was startled. "You can do that? Isn't that illegal?"

He grinned. "Only if you get caught."

"Then what is it you want from me?"

"To pull up any articles you find and cross reference names. Who goes to the same parties outside the museum. Eats in the same restaurants. Gets their pictures in the newspapers together."

"Okay. I can do that. And maybe it'll jog something in my brain I forgot."

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She had just finished the first three names on the list when the sat phone rang. Dino's side of the conversation was brief but grim, and he was frowning when he hung up.

"More trouble?" Jen asked, her stomach doing a swan dive.

"Could be. That was Mike. He's still at the marina."

Jen got up to refill her coffee mug, just to give herself something to do and calm her nerves. "I assume if he called something's happened. What is it?"

Dino refilled his own mug. "Some man he doesn't recognize has been hanging around since early this morning. Casually asking about charters. Who owns the marina. Shit like that. Damn." He smacked his fist on the counter. "I'll be glad to hear back from Ethan as to how someone got information about us, but that won't be until later today. I told Mike to hang loose, grab a cup of coffee in the restaurant that overlooks the marina, and keep an eye on this guy. Call me if anything else sets off any alarms."

She swallowed the bile rising in her throat. "If John wasn't already dead I'd kill him myself. Look at all the people he's putting in danger with this."

Dino gave her a brief but reassuring kiss before he sat back down. "Comes with the territory, *cara*. Meanwhile, let's see what we've got so far." He picked up the yellow pad he'd been making notes on as he did his own research. "Roger Wellborn, the board chairman, definitely has to be a player. He headed the search committee that hired John, along with the wives of a Senator Mackall and a Congressman named Kressler. Also, Louis McWilliams, who it says here is the police commissioner for the city of Detroit." He frowned. "What's a

police commissioner doing on a museum board? I wouldn't think that was his cup of tea. Did we talk about him when you were first giving me the rundown?"

"A little bit. I think I told you he's from an old Hillsborough County family with money going back to the Dark Ages. They've always supported the arts, so I guess this is his contribution. And his wife is the queen of the social register."

"I've got him a bunch of times with Congressman Nathan Kressler and his wife." He looked at his notes. "She's a high powered bank exec, right?"

Jen nodded, and a piece of information jarred itself loose in her brain. "Both men belong to a private club, gentlemen only, and I use the term loosely. And yes, even in this day and age, there are some clubs that exclude women. This one's been around for two hundred years and there's so much money there no one wants to take them on."

Dino snapped his fingers and shuffled through his notes again. "Wait a minute. I found something ... yeah, here it is. The club endowed some kind of scholarship and Kressler and McWilliams got their picture taken with Wellborn and the mayor of Detroit, someone named Sobol."

"Yes, they're all members. I think it's called the Men's Athletic Club. Supposedly all the members, right from the beginning, played in some kind of sports in college." She raked her fingers through her hair and tucked it behind her ears. "Jesus, how could I have forgotten something like that?"

"Did John ever talk about them? About the club? Anything at all?"

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She dusted her fingers idly over the keyboard. "I'm almost embarrassed to tell you I can't remember what we talked about. Or if we ever in fact talked about anything. How awful that sounds. But John ... I don't know. He was such a closed off person. He didn't abuse us or hurt us in any way. He was just ... there. He went to work, he came home, he went out. When he needed a decoration on his arm, I was it." She looked up at Dino, hoping he couldn't see the pain in her eyes. "He gave me a home and Deanne his name. I guess I was grateful he never asked for much in return."

"Maybe he needed you as much as you needed him," Dino suggested.

She frowned. "I don't understand."

"You said the other night the board wanted him to be married. They liked the solid appearance of a married director. So you answered a need for him, too."

"And I'm sure he was delighted that I didn't demand too much of him. You know, for a while I actually thought he was seeing another woman. But John's gambling took all his energy, I guess. I just didn't know about it until too late."

"The reason I asked about the club is because that would be a logical place for those high stakes card games. Private club. Private room. No one knows anything except the people involved."

"That means a lot of the board members had to be part of this. Setting John up so he had no choice except to help them."

"Sounds like it."

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Jen leaned back in her chair, raking her fingers through her hair again as if she could brush away all the unpleasant thoughts. "So taking those two pieces was his little secret revenge. Maybe he planned to sell them for enough bucks to get away and start over again. With a new name?"

"Good possibility," Dino agreed. "Let's get back to this and see what other names we can link together. Then we're gong to take another tack."

"Oh? What's that?"

"We're going to dismantle John's life one brick at a time. Every little thing you remember. And see if we can figure out where he would have left those two pieces. Let's see what you've come up with on *your* search."

* * * *

"Mrs. Caine?" Sean Garrett, one of the two men Ethan had left on house duty for the day, walked into the kitchen where Lisa was chopping vegetables for a salad.

She looked up, an expectant smile on her face. "Yes?"

"There's a man at the gate asking for Mr. Caine. We'd like you to take a look and see if you recognize him."

Wiping her hands on a towel, she followed Garrett to the den where the monitors were set up. A black SUV sat at the entrance gate, driver's side window rolled down.

Sean pressed the button for the mic. "Sir, can you please look toward the camera?"

The man in the driver's seat turned so she could see his full face. The camera did a good job. High cheekbones, thick eyebrows and a chiseled jaw. She'd never seen him before.

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"No." She shook her head. "I have no idea who he is. Did he ask for Ethan?"

"Says he's a private investigator on a case and he was told Mr. Caine might be able to answer some questions for him."

Lisa looked at the monitor again. "You know Ethan never answers anyone's questions. Especially some private investigator. What's his name?"

"He identified himself as Mark Winslow but that could be as phony as he is."

"Can you send one of the men down to talk to him? Someone who can figure out who he really is and what he wants?"

"No problem. I'll do it. But you and the kids sit tight in the house. I'll get someone up here with you." He unclipped his radio from his belt and depressed the Talk button. "Frank? Come on up and spend some time with Mrs. Caine, okay? I'm going down to the gate with Jake."

Frank was there in under a minute. He herded Jamie, who was doing his homework, into the kitchen with Lisa, then sat down at the kitchen table.

"You'll hardly know I'm here, folks," he told them.

Lisa laughed. "Yeah, right. It's okay, Frank, How about some coffee?"

"Sure. That'll be fine."

"All right." Sean checked the clip in his gun and reholstered it. Jake, who was waiting for him in the hallway, did the same.

"Is someone after us, Mom?" Jamie asked, dumping his homework on the table. For a ten-year-old he sounded

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remarkably calm. But then, not everyone his age had suffered a kidnapping and a race through the jungle.

"No. But you know what your dad said about strangers."

Deanne was looking from one adult to the other, then back at Jamie. "Is someone going to hurt us?"

Lisa stooped and pulled the little girl into a hug. "Not even for a minute, sweetie. These men will keep us very safe."

"I expect we'll be back up in a few minutes," Garrett told Frank. "You know the drill. Nobody in or out."

He set the alarm before opening the front door, leaving a fifteen second window for himself and Jake to get outside. They walked slowly down the driveway to the gate where the man waited calmly in his SUV. Another of Ethan's men was standing just inside the gate, his gun in plain sight. Garrett pressed a button in one of the pillars to open the small walk-through gate and he and Frank each stood on one side of the SUV.

"I don't believe Mr. Caine was expecting you, was he?" he asked the man.

"No." The man was completely unfazed. "He wasn't. I took a chance that he might be here. I was told he might be able to help me with a case I'm working on. He came highly recommended."

"Exactly who told you that?" Garrett kept his voice deceptively mild. "Who's your reference?"

"I'd rather tell Caine that myself." His eyes looked directly into Garrett's, giving nothing away.

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"Mr. Caine isn't here at the moment, so maybe you could tell us what you want and we can check with him when he gets back."

"Exactly when will that be?"

"We don't discuss Mr. Caine's timetable," Frank said from the other side. "I'd like to know who gave you this address and told you to contact Mr. Caine."

"I told you." There wasn't even the slightest tremor in the man's body. "I'll tell Caine myself."

Damn, this guy's good, Garrett thought. He's as cold as Ethan. Wonder if they actually know each other? Well, even so. Orders are orders. No one gets in without the boss's personal okay.

"Well." Garrett shifted just enough for his shoulder holster to be visible. "That won't get you a ticket through the gate. I'm sorry you wasted your time. Why don't you give me your cell phone number and I can have Mr. Caine call you?"

The man in the SUV stared hard at him for a long time, then moved his gaze to take a visual sweep of the entire area. Garrett could almost see him clicking off every detail in his mind, like a camera taking shot after shot.

He's looking for something. Or someone.

He'd have to tell the boss about this right away, and call some of the guys in for added protection.

Then the man dropped his gaze, as if he'd made a decision about something.

"Perhaps you can help me after all. The person I'm really looking for is a man named Dino Brancuzzi. A client is very

anxious to get in touch with him. I understand he and Mr. Caine are close friends."

Holy shit! The boss will have a stroke when I tell him this guy asked for Dino.

"I don't really think I can give you any information," he told the man in an uninflected voice. "I think you'd better tell your client he needs to look elsewhere. You need to back up now, and head down the road."

Garrett was reminded of the staring contests he used to have as a kid in grade school. Only this man was no kid and he'd hate to lose a contest of any kind to him.

"All right," he said at last. "Perhaps you could give me a number where I can reach Mr. Caine."

Garrett stood back and motioned Frank to do the same. "Sorry. We only take referrals and usually that person calls us ahead of time. If you get going right now, you can beat most of the traffic."

The man looked as if he wanted to say something else, then turned the ignition and backed around. In a moment, he was heading back down the driveway.

"Not good," Frank told Garrett, coming to stand beside him.

"Not good at all." Garrett used his radio to call the house and tell them to keep everyone inside. Then he called the dormitory where people slept when they were training, or working on a project for Caine, and ordered everyone out to guard duty. Finally he unhooked his cell phone and punched the button that speed-dialed Ethan's phone.

"What?" Ethan asked when the connection went through.

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Oh, oh. If he's not in a good mood now, he's gonna be in a worse one in a minute.

"Are you on your way home?" Garrett asked. "Because I think we've got trouble."

* * * *

"Well, it went about like I expected," Grant said into the cell phone.

"So you got nowhere."

Mac's voice was edged with impatience. He'd been fending off calls all morning from the other members of the 'organization', not just the core group. Everyone was on edge, wanting results. Wanting things resolved. Wanting the missing pieces found before the new shipment arrived. He snorted. Like he could just wave a magic wand and make it happen.

"Listen. They said he wasn't there, and it was hard to tell if that was the truth. These guys could lie under torture. And that compound is something else. Jesus, Mac. That place is a fortress. I eyeballed everything I could but there's some heavy muscle around that place. If Jennifer Sutherland is there she's well protected. They could keep her there forever."

"But anyone can get nervous," Mac pointed out. "Anyone will make changes if they think their security is compromised. Even the great Ethan Caine."

"Are you sure this was the right thing to do?"

"You'll have to trust me on this. We needed to do something to nudge them along." Silence thrummed along

the connection for a moment. "Is there some place you can park that you won't be seen where you can still get a good view of the place?"

"Negative. Down the road a mile or so maybe, but not in sight of the compound. Caine must have the last piece of isolated property in this part of Florida. They've got cameras and guards all around the property and I don't doubt a good sensor system, too. Why?"

"I'd really like to know for sure if he'd hiding the woman and the child there or if he's sent them to his friend. Or even somewhere else. If we could grab the kid we could force the woman to talk."

Grant snorted. "I'd have an easier time getting into the White House to assassinate the president." He threaded his way through the increasing traffic. "I'm on my way to the Keys now. I have a reservation on a plane leaving in two hours and a rental there waiting for me."

"No." Mac's answer was clipped. "Not yet. Change it. If you can't get close to the place by car, do a helicopter flyover. In fact, do it more than once."

"You think they won't notice a bird in their air space?"

"I hope they do," Mac told him. "Maybe that's what we need for some action. If he's hiding the woman and the kid there and he thinks there's danger from the air, he may feel compelled to move them. Then we can act."

"You really think they'd move someone from such a secure facility?"

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"I told you." Mac's voice was angry and irritated. "If they think they can be breached, and invasion from the air is the way to do it, they might change plans."

"I hope to God you're right, because I don't have a good feeling about this."

"We can't afford to sit and wait any longer," Mac snapped. "Okay, I'm going to give you a number to call. Ask for Jimmy. He'll fix you up with a helicopter and also get a man in position to monitor traffic in and out of the compound without being seen. Let's see if we can shake things up."

"You want me to drive back to Caine's place after the flyover?"

"Negative. You ride in the helo. I want you to watch from the air to see what happens. You can give your guy on the road a heads up. Call me when it's taken care of."

"You know I've never questioned anything you asked me to do, no matter what it was. But I have to tell you, I think you're making a mistake here."

"We're running out of time and options," Mac said. "It's time to take some chances."

"This is costing you some bucks, you know."

"Spend whatever you have to. Just force that woman out in the open."

* * * *

"No, I'm not home yet." Ethan's voice was cold and sharp. "I cancelled my return ticket and chartered a plane. We just left Washington."

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"You don't sound happy." Dino kept his own voice level and calm, trying not to alarm Jennifer, but he could tell that more trouble was cooking.

"That's definitely an understatement. Don't repeat any of this to Jen, okay?"

Dino forced himself to smile. "Whatever you say, E. I'm yours to command."

"Good. Keep it light like that. I got a call a few minutes ago from Sean Garrett, the man I left in charge at the house."

Dino's stomach clenched. *Please don't let this be about Deanne or Ethan's family.*

"What did he have to say?"

"A stranger pulled up to the gate a while ago asking for me. You know we don't get casual visitors. Even when Jamie has friends over—carefully selected friends, I might add—we always know ahead of time who it is."

"Yes, of course."

Dino kept his gaze on Jen. She had gone back to working on the laptop, her lower lip tugged between even white teeth. *God, she's becoming more and more a part of me.*

"Garrett and one of the other men did their routine," Ethan went on. "Asked who sent him. All the usual crap. Of course he gave away nothing. But nobody comes to see any of us now without a referral. And Dino?"

"Yeah?"

"He also asked about you."

Dino swore softly under his breath. "Does this connect in some way with your trip to D.C.?"

"Damn right it does." Ethan's anger vibrated over the connection. "I spent two hours with the director himself. Someone with a lot of money and some goddamn big heavy clout—no, he didn't tell me who—bypassed him altogether and got our files dug up and opened."

"Shit." The word slipped out before Dino could think. He saw Jen's head snap up, and he shook his head, mouthing, *Deanne's fine*. She dropped her eyes back to the keyboard but he saw the worry line creasing her forehead.

"Shit is right," Ethan agreed. "That's obviously how this guy got my address. And whatever other information's been passed along to him. The director's called a meeting with all his key personnel, and after that he's going to the president. There are protocols in place to prevent this kind of thing and we can't have senators, or whoever, running over them. But the initial damage is already done."

"So where are we now?"

"Guards are doubled at my house. You need to watch out for visitors in your neighborhood, too. I think they're trying to force us to do something stupid."

"They don't know us very well, do they?"

"No, but we just might do our own thing to force their hand. Is Mike still there? I want him to pick me up when I land."

"He's here. He stayed on the boat last night, but he called a while ago and said we had a curiosity-seeker."

"Tell Mike to find a way to get rid of him and get his ass up here. Then pack Jen up and take her out on the boat. Keep

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changing locations. Call me when you're away from the marina and situated on the water."

"Done." He disconnected the call and gathered his wits for a moment before looking at Jen.

"It's okay," she told him. "I know it's bad news. As long as Deanne's okay, though, that's all that's important. So tell me what Ethan had to say."

He didn't pull any punches. He'd come to realize that whatever the truth—any truth—Jen would find a way to handle it. He repeated what Ethan had told him, reassuring her that the Caine compound was very well guarded and Ethan would assure Deanne's safety.

"But we have to get moving. Remember I mentioned we might be living on the water for a while? Okay, the time's here. Pull your things together, just whatever you absolutely need."

She laughed. "I didn't come with all that much, Dino. That should be easy."

"All right. I have some things to do. We'll be leaving here shortly. And save everything on your laptop. We'll be taking both computers with us."

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Chapter Twelve

"My head is spinning," Jen said as Dino helped her onto the boat. "I can hardly believe all of this."

"Believe it," Dino told her. "But don't worry about it. Everything's being taken care of."

Dino packed everything they were taking, including the laptops, in a huge wicker picnic basket and a cooler. They had enough provisions on board to last until tomorrow when they'd stop at some out of the way port to get supplies. The tricky part was getting Jen on board without anyone seeing her. He called someone named Angel who was obviously an old friend, and in an hour a panel truck with a sign on the side reading, "Carey's Marine Service", pulled into the driveway.

Scanning the street to make sure there weren't any strange eyes on them, he ushered Jen into the van, made brief introductions, then told her to crawl into the big crate in the back.

"Just in case someone's still watching at the marina," Dino said. "Angel's truck has been there before making pickups and deliveries, so it won't wave any red flags."

Jen raised an eyebrow. "Did you have such wonderful accommodations for your other 'guests?'"

"No, pretty lady," Angel told her, grinning. "This one is special for you."

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Then all smiles disappeared as Angel and Dino closed the rear doors. Angel climbed into the front seat and pulled out into the street, Dino right behind him in his SUV.

When they reached the marina, Angel trundled the carton down the pier on a dolly. Mike had called to say he'd gotten rid of their unwanted visitor and not to ask him any details. But Dino agreed he should stay with the boat until he and Jen got there. Now he helped lift the package on board, then the three men carried it down the stairs to the salon. Opening the top, Dino helped Jen out and grinned at her.

"Slick as a whistle," he told her.

"I'm not sure whether to laugh or cry," she told him, rewrapping her ponytail and brushing off her tank top and shorts. "But at least I'm here."

Dino shook hands with Angel who touched his fingers to his forehead and jogged up the steps, whistling. Mike helped Dino break down the carton and stash it away

"I guess I need to get going," Mike said, taking the duffel of money Dino handed him.

"Yeah. Ethan wants you to pick him up and you don't have much time."

"I know. He called just before you got here and told me to get my ass into the chopper and up in the air."

"He told you what's going on up there, right?" Dino asked.

"Yes. He did." Mike's face was grim.

Dino shook his head. "Not good."

"No kidding. He said to remind you to call him as soon as you're out on the water. I'll help you cast off, then I'm outta here."

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"Okay. Thanks, Mike." Dino turned back to Jen. "How about unpacking all our stuff while I get us out of here? I don't want you up on deck until we're well away from prying eyes."

"No problem. I'll take care of it."

She heard the rumble of the big engines as they kicked into life, felt the vibrations beneath her feet and in moments the big boat began its movement away from the marina. She busied herself putting their clothes away in the master bedroom, mostly hers, since Dino apparently kept a wardrobe on board. Then she unpacked the files and yellow pads, and set up both laptops on the table in a corner of the salon.

To keep herself from thinking about Deanne and what might be happening in Tampa, she logged onto the laptop she'd been using. Dino had a very expensive satellite hookup so accessing the Internet wasn't a problem. She found the yellow pad with her notes on it and went back to doing searches on the museum board. When Dino finally came below an hour later she was scribbling as fast as she could and trying to contain her excitement.

"You found something," he guessed, grinning at her.

"Maybe." She rolled her shoulders and flexed the fingers of her right hand. "Sit down and let me tell you. Then you can decide if I've hit something or not."

"We're anchored for a while. Let me get us each a cold beer and you can dazzle me with your research."

Despite his casual tone, Jen detected a note of excitement in his voice, too. She didn't know where they could go with

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their information, but finally, finally she thought they were making some headway.

* * * *

"What now, *jefe*?" Mike asked.

Ethan was pacing in his den, Sean Garrett standing to the side. He'd called Mike from the plane, learned he was almost to Tampa and had him stop to pick him up. They'd landed fifteen minutes ago and Frank had left with another agent to pick up Ethan's car.

"Let me think a minute." Garrett had filled him in on everything to date and he wasn't a happy camper.

"I printed out the pictures from the camera," Garrett told him. "I've got someone down at the barn running it through facial recognition software. He said he'll call and send it up here to your computer as soon as he has something."

"I knew there was a reason I never liked politics," he raged. "Damn politicians don't ever care whose lives they put in jeopardy as long as they can curry favor and get re-elected."

"You don't think one of our clients might have sent him?" Garrett asked.

"Hell, no. They all know the rules. Even the government agencies we work for. They'd call first and get clearance to do it."

"So you were right. Someone's trying to jog us into doing something. But what?"

"Maybe moving Jennifer LaCroix or Deanne to a different location. Make us think they aren't safe here. You haven't let anyone out of the house, right?"

"On your orders. And they've been very good about it. Jamie's got the little girl in his room playing video games." He grinned. "And Mrs. Caine is baking cookies."

Ethan smiled back at him. Lisa was actually a practicing attorney specializing in family law, but since their marriage she'd shifted most of her case load to her two partners. They were happy for the extra income and she enjoyed doing what she referred to as 'normal' things at home. In her first marriage nothing was normal. Baking cookies was something she enjoyed and also a great stress reliever.

"Well," Ethan said. "How lucky for all of us." He started to say something else, then cocked his head, listening. "Do you hear that?" he asked after a moment.

Sean concentrated, then nodded. "Sounds like a chopper."

"Okay. Close all the drapes and shades. Tell everyone not to go near any windows. I'm going to take a look."

Rage still bubbling through him at this invasion of his carefully guarded privacy, he grabbed his binoculars from a desk drawer and slipped out to his back porch, positioning himself in a corner under the roof. A helicopter was just coming in from the north, making a pass over the open fields in back of the house.

Ethan lifted the binoculars to his eyes, trying to catch the bird's identification, but there was nothing painted on the solid black body. The cabin held two people, the pilot and one passenger, but they moved over the area too fast for him to

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get a good look, despite the extreme magnification the binoculars offered. The copter took a long sweep over the property, banked, and flew over once more before disappearing into the distance.

Willing himself to maintain control, he went back into the house where Garrett and Mike waited for him.

"Want me to chase him?" Mike asked.

"No. Not yet." He looked at Garrett. "Anything around the perimeter?"

Sean shook his head. "No. But I sent one of the men to do a slow sweep of the road in both directions. Anyone would have to get way past the house to find a place to hide, but if he's there, we'll flush him out."

Ethan rubbed his chin, thoughts tumbling through his mind. "Yeah, let's find out if he's a tag team, with someone keeping watch on the road. Radio whoever's out there to be sure they get a good look but tell them not to approach."

"Why not?"

"They want us to make a move. Let's do just that and see if we can catch ourselves a rat. And call the barn and see how the run on that guy's picture is coming."

* * * *

"Ethan again?" Jen asked as Dino put the phone down on the table.

"Yes. I need to bring you up to date, but first I want to make sure you know Deanne is safe."

He saw the panic flash at once in her eyes and her face tighten with anxiety. "Something else has happened."

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He told her about the helicopter making a pass over the compound. "Since the so-called visitor couldn't get in, he probably decided to see what he could from the air. Ethan kept everyone inside and checked out the bird himself. Unfortunately it had no markings. But it made him mad enough to try and force their hand."

"So what does that mean? Exactly?"

Her voice was steady but he couldn't miss the tremble in her hands. He urged her out of the chair and enfolded her in his arms. Her heart was beating faster than a bird's and her skin was cold. He wanted to kill her dead husband all over again, and the rest of the people who'd put her in this position.

"Ethan has a plan. He'll call us back after a while. And again he said to tell you Deanne is safer than the president."

She leaned against him and he wrapped his arms tighter around her, feeling the trembling of her body that she was so valiantly trying to hide. Funny, he thought. The image he'd carried of her all these years had been so superficial. This was a warm, honest, loving woman who deserved to have her own happy place on the planet. When this was over, he was going to give it to her. And Deanne.

He tilted her face up and pressed his mouth to hers. Light, he told himself. Keep it light. But he felt the silky slide of her tongue against his, the softness of her lips, and his hands tightened on her, pressing her into him. When she clutched at his shoulders, the heat of her seared through him. In two seconds he would forget the danger they were in, forget what they had to do, forget there were lives at stake.

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Shuddering as he dug deep for control, he set her away from him with great reluctance.

"You make me lose my head, Jennifer. That's not something I'm used to." He smiled at her. "But it's okay. I have big plans for us when this is over. Meanwhile, let's see what we've come up with here. That ought to keep us busy."

"Oh. The research." Her face smoothed out and a tiny flame of excitement danced in her eyes. She turned the computer so he could see the screen. "Look. I made a chart. It's amazing how all these people are interconnected once you start digging into their lives."

He traced his finger over the boxes and lines she'd drawn. "It's almost like an incestuous little group," he commented. "They party together, attend functions together, and sit at the same tables. And it's always the same group of people. There's a hell of a lot of power here." He glanced at her. "It's hard to believe a lieutenant governor, a famous criminal attorney, senators, representatives, bankers, all of these top-of-the-pyramid people would be involved in something like this. But then, there're no boundaries on greed."

"It frightens me," she told him. "They have all the power."

"No, *cara*, not all of it. We have plenty of our own. Let's go over this and see if we can figure out who's driving the wagon."

* * * *

The intercom connected to the barn beeped. "Ethan?"
Ethan depressed a button. "Yeah?"

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"Got something on the facial recognition software," the man on the other end told him. "Just sent it to your computer."

"Okay. Thanks." Ethan tapped a few keys and a man's face filled the screen. He scrolled down to look at the information. Sean Garrett watched over his shoulder.

"Grant Douglas," he read. "Nice history he's got."

Ethan grunted. "Yeah, nice. The guy's been a mercenary for fifteen years, taking jobs all over the world. Look at some of the places he's been. He sure doesn't look like he's the hero on the playground. I can see this guy easily killing Jack Smiley."

"Are you going to call Mr. Brancuzzi about this?"

"I'll have to." He pushed the intercom button again for the barn. "Is Maury still there?" Maury Hanson was their crack computer hacker.

"Yes, sir."

"Good. I need a lot more information on this guy. And I sure want to know who in the hell has the connections to hire someone like him. Tell him to crack every database he can, and do it ASAP."

There was a pause, then, "He's on it, Ethan."

"Good. Tell him thanks."

The radio in Ethan's hand crackled.

"Ethan?" Frank's voice. "A black SUV is sitting in that little turnaround about a mile down the road. He's pretty well hidden in the trees but he's got a good view of traffic in both directions."

"Where are you now?"

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"About a mile past him, around the bend."

"Good, good. Stay there. I'll let you know when we're set up here."

"Hey, Ethan?" Sean was standing by a window, the drapes opened less than an inch. "Chopper's making a pass again."

"Good. Then let's give him something to look at." He looked at Sean. "Is Joanna ready?"

"All set." He grinned. "She likes playing spy counterspy."

Ethan grunted. "She should. She's one of the best we've got. We're just lucky she was at the barn today finishing up some work. Okay. Let's go."

He took five minutes to talk to Lisa and make sure the kids were settled.

"I'm leaving two men here in the house," he told her. "All the alarms are set and the perimeter's well guarded. This won't take long."

"We're fine." She stood on tiptoe and kissed him. "I'll take care of the kids. You take care of yourself."

"Always," he promised, and headed toward the front of the house."

In a few minutes Sean Garrett pulled Ethan's SUV up to the porch. Ethan, in dark glasses with his signature battered hat pulled low on his face and his coat collar turned up, hustled Joanna Brannagan out of the house. The woman also had dark glasses on, blonde hair pulled into a ponytail and she wore loose cotton clothing with the blouse collar turned up. Ethan hurried her into the back seat, slammed the door, and jumped into the front beside Sean.

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The helicopter hovered briefly overhead, then banked off to the right.

"Okay," Ethan ordered. "Take off. Head toward the interstate but use the back road. Let's not make this too easy for them."

The front gate slid open and they turned onto the two lane road that led up to it. The hidden SUV wouldn't normally have been easy to spot, but they were trained to look for things out of the ordinary.

"There he is," Garrett said as they breezed by him at just over the speed limit.

"Okay. Let's see what he does." Ethan shifted his gaze to watch the side view mirror. "He's moving. Here he comes now. He's staying just far enough back that he thinks we won't notice him."

Sean Garrett laughed mirthlessly. "Not notice him? Has he taken a look at how little traffic there is on this road?"

"Remember, he doesn't have much of a choice. Okay, here's Frank." Ethan depressed the talk button on the radio. "Got him?"

"Yes. I'll wait a minute or two, then pull out. We'll make a sandwich out of him."

"Wait to see what he does first. We're taking the back road to the interstate. If he plans to cut us off, the perfect spot is just up ahead, before we hit civilization again."

"One man thinks he's going to take you?" Frank couldn't hide his skepticism.

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"Maybe it's his day to be stupid. I'm guessing he and whoever hired him are under enough pressure they'll try anything. Okay. Heads up. Here we go."

The vehicle behind them sped up, passed them, and just before the road turned again, pulled in front of them, forcing them to stop.

"Hang back for the moment," Ethan told Frank on the radio. "Let's see how he plays this. Sean, do nothing until I say so."

Two men climbed out of the vehicle ahead of them, guns drawn, moving slowly toward Ethan's SUV, one on either side.

"Open the doors and come out with your hands up," the man who'd been driving hollered. "Nice and slow and no one will get hurt. We just want the woman."

Ethan had the radio on his lap. He waited until the two men were actually standing close to the SUV before he depressed the Talk button again. "Okay, Frank. Now."

Frank roared up behind them with enough speed the two men didn't have time to react. The one on Sean's side turned and fired at Frank, the bullets bouncing off the armored doors of the vehicle. Frank accelerated hard enough to knock the man down.

At the same time, Ethan opened his door and slammed it into the man standing near him. Before he could recover, Ethan had his gun in his hand, the man on the ground, and his gun in the man's ear. Sean had the other man in a similar position. Meanwhile, Joanna was out of the SUV, sunglasses and hat discarded and her own gun in a two-handed grip.

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"Under control," Ethan told her. "Put away your gun and catch these." With his free hand he dug two pairs of flex cuffs out of a pocket and tossed them to her.

She fastened them expertly while Ethan and Sean kept their guns on the men. Then he and Sean jerked them to their feet, turned them around and shoved them against the hood of the SUV. Sean dug through their pockets to come up with identification. He looked through the wallets, then tossed them to Ethan.

"Well, well. John Smith and Harold Smith." He raised his eyes to the men. "Funny, you don't look like brothers."

"What do you want to do with them?" Garrett asked. "We'll be getting some traffic along here pretty soon, so we ought to get them out of sight."

"You and Frank take them to the barn. I'll drive back with Joanna and meet you there. And hopefully Magic Maury will have more information for us on our other friend."

The men stared at them with eyes colder than ice, their faces expressionless. Neither of them said a word as they were tucked into the SUV and driven off.

Ethan holstered his gun and turned to Joanna. "Thanks, you did great."

She laughed. "Ethan, I didn't do anything."

"Everything worked out the way I hoped it would. But if it had fallen apart, you could have been hurt. These people want the woman they're after very badly."

She gave him an impish grin. "I wasn't worried with you in charge, boss."

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Ethan grunted, hiding a smile. As he turned to get into the car, a noise overhead drew Ethan's attention and he raised his eyes. The helicopter was making a pass over the area again before heading away, following the path of the road.

"Shit. Damn and double damn."

"Trouble?" Joanna asked.

"That helicopter is back again. Should I have expected less?" He pulled out his radio. "Okay. Let's go see what, if anything, we can get out of our two new guests. And I'm going to send Mike up in the air. Maybe we can find out who's in that chopper."

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Chapter Thirteen

Dino moved the boat twice after leaving the marina, traveling about an hour each time before dropping anchor again.

"Just playing it safe," he told Jen. They were sitting at the table in the salon, a cold beer in front of each of them.

"Do you see any boats moving with us?" she asked, leaning back and rolling her shoulders to work the kinks out. She'd been working on the chart almost nonstop.

"No. At least not yet. But I don't like Ethan's information about his visitor. That guy is trouble."

She called up the chart on the screen again. "I keep trying to think who in this group would even have contact with a man like this."

"Pull up the bios on each of them again and let's see if anything hits us. I'll get my portable printer and hook it up. I should have done it before."

In less than half an hour they had compiled full biographies on each of fourteen people and printed them out. Dino was going over each one, looking for something that would indicate a connection with Grant Douglas, when the sat phone buzzed. Dino picked it up, checked the caller ID, and clicked the On button.

"Ethan," he told Jen, then turned back to the phone. "Please don't tell me this is more bad news. I think we've had all we need for today."

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"It seems whoever hired Grant Douglas not only has unlimited resources but also determination to get the job done."

Jen felt the knot in her stomach tighten again. "What now?"

Dino told her about the helicopter flyover, the attempt to kidnap the woman masquerading as her, and the chopper taking in the scene.

"That means he's reported back to whoever is pulling his strings," he went on. "Ethan thinks they might turn their attention south. Towards us. Which means it's a good thing we aren't sitting ducks in Key West."

"But can't they find us out here on the water just as easily?"

The smile he gave her eased the tension a little. "Only if they know where to look, *cara*. Only if they know where to look. I'm going to move us again. Take a little break here and come up to the cockpit with me. Get some fresh air."

Jen frowned. "Won't someone see me?"

"I think we're far enough away from prying eyes. Let me take a look first."

But before he could climb the stairs, the sat phone buzzed again. Dino looked at the readout and frowned.

"More bad stuff?" Jen asked.

"Maybe good. I don't know. It's from one of my contacts I reached out to." He clicked the phone on. "Talk to me."

Jen watched the muscles in his face tighten as he listened to the conversation. At one point he reached over to the table and shuffled through the bios they'd printed out, pulling out a

couple of them. As he scanned them, his lips thinned and his eyes darkened with anger.

"Got it," he said. "Thanks. I owe you for this one."

He thumbed off the phone and sat down opposite Jen. An involuntary shiver skittered over her spine.

"Tell me," she urged, curling her hands into fists. "No matter how bad it is, I have to know."

Dino picked up his beer and took a long sip, then set the bottle down. "You know, Ethan and I and Mike and the others, whether in the service or working on contract, always approached each job with honor. We had a mission and the result, too, was honorable."

Jen wrinkled her forehead. The look on his face would have frightened her if she hadn't already gotten to know the real man. "Where is this going, Dino?"

"There are people who have trained the way we have, have honed their skills, and now sell them to the highest bidder no matter what result, or who the victim is. And I use the word victim deliberately." He picked up the sheets of paper he'd been looking at. "Grant Douglas, the man who tried to get into Ethan's compound—and most likely the one doing the flyover in the helicopter—is just such a person. He took the training the Army Rangers gave him and became a mercenary, but one with no scruples or honor. He kills for hire and who the person is makes no difference to him."

"B-but that's no more than murder." Was this the man after her? Jen felt nausea creeping up in her throat.

"No kidding. My source says his kill list is more extensive than I want to know." He hitched his chair closer so she could

look at the bio with him. "Based on that, I've discovered four people on our master list who could be the link. People who would have come in contact with this man and could afford to hire him. Take a look."

Jen felt even sicker when she saw the four names he'd pulled out: Detroit Police Commissioner Louis McWilliams, Detroit Mayor Henry Sobol, Michigan Senator Wayne Mackall, and high-powered criminal attorney Daniel Hayes.

"Each of these men was either in the Rangers when Douglas was or connected with him in some other way years ago," Dino continued. "For all we know, whoever's pulling his strings has used him for a number of things. Certainly he was the one who orchestrated John's death and killed Jack Smiley."

Jen pushed the papers away, unable to look at them. "The others are involved, too," she pointed out. "They're all connected."

Dino nodded. "I'd bet the million I just sent back to Ethan that all of them are part of this stolen antiquities ring and have gotten fat and rich off it over the years. But they hit a stroke of bad luck when John decided to help himself. And the fact that the items in question are on the Iraq hot list only ramps up the situation."

"So what happens now?" Her head was beginning to throb and she rubbed her temples, trying to ease the pressure.

"Now Ethan and I use every resource we have to identify the person we want. He'll give up the others."

"What about the two men Ethan captured? Can we get anything from them?"

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Dino shrugged. "Doubtful, but he'll give it his best shot. Best case scenario, we send a message to the bad guys and it may force them to make another move." He lifted her hand and kissed each of the fingers. "But I promised to keep you safe and I will. Trust me on that."

She gave him a shaky smile. "I do. I will."

"Good. Now. Let me check topside and make sure we don't have any unwelcome company. Then how about coming up for some fresh air?"

"Sounds good to me."

* * * *

"The package has gone," Charlie Waters spat into the phone. "They sent it expedited shipping to your address so you should have it shortly. Then I'm done."

"Wait," the voice on the other end said. "Wait just a minute. First of all, won't that raise some eyebrows? And secondly, we have an arrangement. You're not off the hook that easily."

"What do you think you can do, send someone to kill me?" Charlie's voice was bitter. "There are too many people in line ahead of you if I don't get my ass to someplace safe and stay there for a long time."

"Charlie, listen—"

"No. I'm done listening. And don't try to call me again. I'm taking this phone apart and ditching it."

He clicked off, then proceeded to dismantle the sat phone. As he zigzagged through alleys he tossed pieces of it into different garbage piles. Let somebody try to find *that*.

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When the last piece was disposed of, he hurried to his hideout and gathered the few things he'd wrapped together. Digging beneath a loose stone, he retrieved the money he hadn't yet had time to send to his bank, stuffed it into the special pockets in his pants, and hurried to where his transportation awaited him. He was paying an exorbitant price for it so he expected it to be there. He was ready to enjoy the spoils he'd gathered and live in luxury for a good long while. Far away from all the people who wanted his hide.

* * * *

"I'm on my way to Key West," Grant said into his cell phone. "I got the hell out of Tampa when one of Caine's private choppers started chasing us."

"This whole thing is turning into a disaster." Mac's anger came through the connection loud and clear. "Why is it so difficult to execute a simple operation?"

Grant ground his teeth. "Because it isn't so damn simple." He'd warned the man this was a big mistake. Not his fault if no one chose to listen to him. "Is your man still hanging around Brancuzzi's marina?"

"He was spotted and had to make himself scarce for a while. When he got back, Brancuzzi's boat was gone. And just because Caine used a female decoy doesn't mean Jennifer Sutherland isn't at his place. Or with Brancuzzi. Take your pick."

In all his years doing wet work, Grant Douglas had never seen anything go to hell as fast as this assignment had. "Tell him to rent a boat and wait for me. I'll find the bastard. If the

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Sutherland woman isn't with Caine, she's with Brancuzzi. And her kid may be there, too. I'll bet half what you're paying me this whole thing with Ethan Caine was just to throw us off the track. Jerk our chains."

"All right. I'll call him now." The connection was silent for a long minute. "Don't botch this up. I can feel the feds breathing down my neck."

He should worry more about botching it up himself.

"You'll have more than the feds to worry about if I can't nail Brancuzzi and get hold of the woman. The feds stick you in a cell. Caine's people stick you in a box."

"Just do it," Mac snapped. "Call me when you've got everything in place." He broke the connection.

Grant dropped the cell phone on the seat. He'd surfed the Internet for Blackwater Charters and found a picture of Dino Brancuzzi's boat, then sent it to his cell phone. If the boat was anywhere in the Atlantic or the Gulf, he'd find it.

* * * *

Ethan had left the two thugs to his men, deciding he needed to be with his wife and the children. Lisa had a cool head and didn't panic easily, and Jamie was incredible for a kid his age, especially considering what he'd been through. His biggest concern was Deanne, who he wasn't sure had even recovered from seeing the man she believed was her father, John Sutherland, shot in cold blood. Then she'd been dragged more than a thousand miles to a house full of strangers.

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Jen had done a terrific job raising his daughter. His daughter! He could still hardly get his mind around that fact. Lisa was wonderful with her, reaching out to include Deanne in their everyday life. He knew that Jen would be calling the shots, deciding how and when he'd be involved in her life, but that was okay. And it made him think about a child with Lisa, something they'd put off discussing.

Meanwhile, he had to get this stinking mess cleaned up, and their two prisoners weren't going to be any help, no matter what they did.

Sean Garrett had called up to the house from the barn five minutes earlier but he had nothing to report. "I could beat these guys to death, boss, and they won't give it up. They're seasoned operatives who are used to whatever we can do to them."

"For people with experience, they sure made a mistake this time."

"They know that, and I think they're embarrassed. Other than that, nothing." Ethan could hear the irritation in Sean's voice.

"Have they asked to call anyone?"

"Nope. They aren't even talking to each other. What do you want us to do with them?"

"Take their fingerprints and have Maury run them through every data base he can get into. Then lock 'em up in the training cell until we sort this out."

"Done." Sean clicked off.

Mike was back from his little excursion in the air with no results, either.

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"By the time I got airborne and headed out to look for him, that chopper had landed from wherever it took off and was safely tucked away in someone's barn," he told Ethan.

Ethan lifted an eyebrow. "Not a hangar?"

"No. There isn't one close enough, but there are still enough barns in this area big enough to hide a couple of planes."

"Did you see anything that might lead you to one place rather than another?"

"Again, no. Whoever this is, they know their stuff. Too well, as far as I'm concerned."

"But not well enough to get around us," Ethan pointed out. "All right. Lisa's got a fresh pot of coffee going in the kitchen and she and the kids have been baking cookies." He grinned. "I'm sure they need help eating them. Help yourself and hang loose. I have a feeling we're through playing cops and robbers."

Mike had barely left the den before the sat phone rang.

"We've got four names for you," Dino said, skipping a greeting. "Any one of them could be the one pulling Grant Douglas's strings."

"But he won't necessarily be the brains behind the operation," Ethan pointed out.

"True. I was hoping you could give us a little more help there. Maybe get into some hidden files on these guys. I've gone as far as I can with my sources. These names are a little hot for me to handle."

"I know just the person to ask." Ethan's voice was tinged with anger and bitterness. "He owes me. He can pay up."

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What's your plan now? You can bet you're next on their list since they got nowhere here."

"I know. Sneaking her onto the boat in that carton only bought us a little time, I guess. We'll be staying out on the water, away from the house and the marina. I'd like to be in the middle of the action, but my first priority is to keep Jen safe."

"As it was from the beginning. All right. I'll see what I can find out for you."

He disconnected the call, then dialed a number in Washington. The director owed him big. It was time to pay up.

* * * *

Dino had them on the move again. Jen sat beside him in the cockpit, tense but controlled. He could tell she was glad to be out in the fresh air again. Steering with one hand, he put one arm around her and hugged her against his body, feeling some of the tension that gripped her ease off.

They were far enough out in the Atlantic that he could spot any strange boats around him. The only noise besides his own engines was a buzz in the sky overhead. Shading his eyes, he saw the tiny speck of a plane floating lazily against the clouds.

Someone out for an afternoon spin, he thought to himself. Twenty minutes later, when the plane hadn't moved from the area, the back of his neck began to itch and the muscles at the base of his spine tightened.

Son of a bitch.

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They were tracking him from the air. This was the last thing he'd expected. He'd only been focused on evading them on the water and on land. Well, hell.

"Don't panic," he told Jen, "but I think that plane up there is paying a little too much attention to us."

She looked up and saw the tiny dot. "Is that someone after us? Can they really see us from there?"

"I'd bet on it. And that they have a strong pair of field glasses trained on us right now." He picked up his binoculars and adjusted the focus. "At least they aren't coming in with guns blazing."

"Because they want me," she guessed, "and now they know where I am."

"Don't worry. They aren't going to get you. But hang on. We need to kick this up a notch."

Calling on the maximum power of the twin diesels, he moved the throttles full ahead, turned the boat, and headed back the way they came.

"Where are we going?" Jen asked.

"Back towards land. I made a major miscalculation, figuring we could stay off their radar out here, moving from place to place. I wasn't expecting air surveillance. If we stay out now here we'll be sitting ducks. I know a place we can pull in and hide."

"Then what?"

"Then we prepare for unwelcome guests and I call Ethan and Mike to get us some fire power."

* * * *

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Grant had marked the coordinates where he'd sighted Brancuzzi's boat, knowing the man would be looking for a place to slip into where he'd be out of the way. But Grant was used to this. He'd followed this drill so many times before it was almost second nature to him. Too bad the jerks in Tampa had gotten themselves caught. Mac had assured him they knew what they were doing. So much for that. Next time he'd pick the men himself. If he made it to a next time.

Maybe this was a signal to him that it was time to get out of the game. Luck only held for so long, and he needed to get out before he lost his edge and ended up like those two jokers who'd gotten themselves caught.

Thankfully he didn't hit much traffic from the small airport to the marina where Mac's man was waiting for him with a fast speedboat and the requested arms.

"You ever done this before?" he asked the man, who told him his name was Chuck.

"Chased a phantom? Sure. Want me to drive or look?"

"Drive. You know these waters better than I do." Grant handed him a slip of paper. "Here's where I spotted them. My guess is they headed back towards Key West, looking to lose themselves in the crowd of boats on the water and then slip into a hiding place." He flipped open his cell phone and hit the camera button. "Here's what the boat he's using looks like."

Chuck studied it. "Big son of a bitch. Not too many places to stash it away. I know all the little coves and lagoons around here. We'll find them."

In seconds they had cast off and were pulling away from the dock.

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Chapter Fourteen

The closer they got to Key West, the more tourist traffic they found out on the water. Dino maneuvered them skillfully through the other boats, slowing down when they got within a mile of the marina.

"There's a place here I'm looking for," he told Jen. "I used it once before. Ah, there it is."

He throttled back so far they were almost drifting as he guided the boat around a bend and into a little cove. Land covered with thick foliage jutted out far enough on either side of the narrow inlet to provide as much camouflage as they were going to get. Dino set the engines to idle and picked up the sat phone.

"Time to send in reinforcements, E," he said into the phone. Dino explained their situation and gave his coordinates. "We need Mike and a shooter. And not you, Big Daddy. You manage this from home."

He knew Ethan would be itching to get into the action, but the man was also sensible enough not to risk his life unnecessarily anymore.

"I'll have him pick up Angel. He'll be on his way as soon as I hang up."

Dino disconnected the call and turned to Jen.

"Have you ever fired a gun? Do you know how to shoot?" He had to give her some kind of protection. Just in case the worst happened.

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Her face paled and she swallowed. Hard. "Not for a long time."

"That's all right. It's like riding a horse or a bike. The muscles never forget." He flipped open a tiny cubbyhole beside the wheel and pulled out a handgun. "This is an H&K Compact 9mm. Small enough to fit your hand but still with a good kick. Try holding it."

He placed it in her hands and fitted her fingers around the grip. He watched as she automatically shifted her hands to a more secure position, aiming away from him and sighting down the line.

Good. Better than good. She'll handle it.

"I can do this," she told him.

"I have every confidence in you, *cara*." He took the gun back, checked the clip and racked the slide. "You're all set. There's one in the chamber and five left in the clip. If anyone gets past me, don't hesitate. Just shoot and keep shooting. Okay?"

She was still pale but he watched as she visibly gathered herself and nodded.

"I'm fine. But I know you'll handle things."

He kissed her forehead. "Your confidence is overwhelming. I'll handle things. The gun is just added insurance. Let's go below so I can get ready."

In the salon he unlocked a cupboard built into the paneling and saw Jen's eyes widen as he removed part of its contents. "Another H&K," he told her, holding it up. "Just bigger." He held up the next one. "An assault rifle, made to break down.

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And..." he showed her the last piece of artillery, a large handgun, "...a Kimber 40mm."

"I'm impressed."

"Good. Let's hope our friends are, too." He stuffed extra ammunition in a small canvas bag he took out and slung over his shoulder. Then he settled Jen on the couch out of sight of the stairs and made sure she had a good grip on the gun.

She was still staring at all of his weapons.

He shaped his lips into a wry grin. "I don't expect to use them all, Jen. And the Kimber is just added insurance. Okay?"

She clutched the gun and nodded. "Do whatever you have to."

"Okay." He flipped a switch on a wall panel that was part of his security system. To anyone else it looked like nothing more than an intercom. "If trouble shows up I'll let you know through this."

She nodded and he took the steps to the deck two at a time, then jogged up to the cockpit. With the rifle slung over his shoulder and the 9mm in his hand, he settled down to wait.

* * * *

Henry looked at the Caller ID on his phone and gritted his teeth. Now what?

"The shipment is here," the voice told him.

"Already?"

"That idiot Waters sent it expedited. We're just lucky I've had things come in this way before and customs didn't do any more than glance at the manifest and declaration."

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"You need to hide those pieces until we clean up this mess."

"What about the buyers?"

Henry gave a humorless chuckle. "You really want to do this before we get this mess cleaned up?"

"I want to get them out of my hands," the voice snapped. "I have a great deal to lose."

"As do we all." He gritted his teeth. "Just lock them away where you usually do and keep calm. I understand Mac's man has the Sutherland woman in his sights. This will all be over soon."

"It damn well better be."

He winced as the phone slammed in his ear. Calming himself, he dialed Mac's private line.

"What?"

"Don't get testy with me," Henry said. "Just tell me your man has everything under control and we'll be fine."

"I'll have a report shortly. Don't call me. I have people coming to my office. I'll get back to you."

Henry was left holding a dead phone. Reaching in his desk drawer, he fished out a small bottle of antacid tablets and tossed two in his mouth, then massaged his stomach. He'd be lucky if he lived to enjoy the fruits of all this.

* * * *

Chuck slowed the boat down to give Grant the opportunity to scan both shorelines. They were well away from Key West by now and moving away from the worst of the traffic congestion.

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"There." Grant's hand touched his shoulder. "I think I see something. Slow down a little more."

Chuck obligingly throttled back a little, trying to see where Grant was looking. Sunlight glinted briefly on something metallic, then was gone.

"You think that's his boat? In that cove we just passed?" Chuck took another quick glance over his shoulder.

"Can you get a boat that size in there?" Grant asked. "You'd know that better than me."

"If you know what you're doing." They were having to shout to be heard over the roar of the boat's engines. "And he probably does. The water's pretty deep until you're almost on shore."

Grant crouched down so he could speak directly into Chuck's ear. "Okay. Come around, then throttle back again and move in as slowly as you can. If he hears us and tries to outrun us we can still nail him."

He checked the load on his Glock 9mm and slung the strap of a rifle over his shoulder. Then he crouched down in the seat and kept his eyes trained on the shore to their right.

* * * *

Dino heard them coming up on his left, trolling close to the shore as slowly as a speedboat could. He positioned himself below the windshield of the cockpit, tucked in out of sight but with the entrance to their hiding place still visible.

Pulling the microphone down to his mouth he said in a low voice, "We've got company coming, Jen. Be prepared just in case."

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He heard the engine moving closer, identifying it as an inboard for a fast boat.

Come on, Mike, wherever you are. Get here now.

He saw the speedboat nose into the inlet, then it disappeared below his line of sight. He waited, finger on the trigger. Suddenly the crack! crack! crack! of an assault rifle split the air and bullets stitched across the windshield and the side of the cockpit.

Dino hunkered further down, grabbed the microphone and whispered, "Stay put, Jen. Don't move. Do not move."

"We know you're there, Brancuzzi," a voice shouted to him. "Just give us the woman and there won't be a problem."

Yeah, right.

"Okay," the same voice said. "I just want you to know I hate doing this."

Another row of bullets sprayed the cockpit, shattering glass and splintering wood.

Dino shifted the rifle, rested it on the edge of the cockpit, pointed downward and answered with his own round of fire. The motor on the speedboat roared to life and it moved far enough away so he could just see it. Two men, one with the assault rifle. He aimed and fired again but the boat was moving away from him too fast. Then it turned and headed back toward the inlet, coming from a different direction.

If he could just hit the gas tank...

Then he heard the most welcome sound of his life. The distinctive whine of a helicopter's rotors, coming closer and closer. And Angel's deep voice booming over a loud speaker.

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"You on the speedboat. Cut your engine and drop your weapons before I forget myself and blow up your boat."

Dino waited the space of a heartbeat. Then another one. He heard rifle fire but couldn't tell whose.

"That's just a warning."

Angel's voice. Thank God.

The speedboat engines died and Dino raised himself to eye level. He shouldered the gun and pointed it down at the two men. "If he doesn't get you, I will," he shouted.

"Hey, *compadre*." Angel's voice again. "You'll owe me plenty for saving your ass just like I always do."

Dino waved his free arm.

"You in the speedboat," Angel's voice boomed. "Throw your keys overboard and your weapons. Right now. My trigger finger is very, very itchy. And I don't think my friend is too happy about what you did to his boat."

As if to emphasize his words, he laid down another round of rifle fire, spraying it in a circle around the speedboat while Mike held the chopper in a hover.

Dino watched the guns and keys hit the water. In a moment Angel and another man fast-roped onto the deck of Dino's boat.

"Shoot them if they so much as twitch an eyebrow," Angel told Dino as the two men climbed down and jumped aboard the speedboat. The man in the passenger seat looked up at Dino with hatred on his face. Dino smiled at him and dipped his head a fraction of an inch.

When the two men were handcuffed, Dino picked up the microphone. "Jen? Honey, come up on deck. It's okay."

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In a moment he heard her footsteps approaching. When she reached him he used one hand to pull her behind him.

"My God, what happened here?" He heard the shock in her voice. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Just fine. Just a couple of kids who don't know how to play nice in the sandbox. Say hello to Angel. You remember him, right?"

"We'll socialize as soon as we get the trash bagged," Angel said.

They had the passenger, who seemed to have been calling the shots, climb up to the boat last, the muzzle of Angel's gun in his ear more than compensating for any reluctance. Dino kept his rifle pointed straight at them, not moving until the handcuffs had been switched from front to back. Angel and his friend escorted them into the salon and five minutes later Angel climbed up to the cockpit.

He and Dino shook hands.

"Saved your bacon again, *compadre*," he grinned.

"Yeah, yeah." Dino clapped him lightly on the shoulder. "Thanks." He waved to Mike, who lifted off and headed toward Key West.

"Our friend Michael will have a nice reception party waiting for the boys downstairs when we get back," Angel said.

"Good." He set his rifle down and reached for Jennifer, pulling her into his arms. He wanted to wrap her up and never let her out of his sight again. "You okay, *cara*?"

"Yes. I'm fine." Her voice was steady but she couldn't hide the faint tremor in her body.

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He kissed her lightly on the cheek, ignoring Angel's raised eyebrows. "No comments," he said.

Jen held out her hand. "Nice to see you again. Thanks for the rescue. I'm glad I didn't have to crawl into a carton this time."

"Or end up in one," Dino said, his voice grim. "All right. Let's get the hell out of here. Call Ethan and give him an update, okay?"

He eased the boat out of the inlet, then pushed the throttles all the way forward, kicking the engines up to maximum speed.

Mike had landed the helicopter in the marina's parking lot and was waiting for them when they pulled into the slip on the pier. With him were four men whose casual dress contrasted with the grim looks on their faces.

Dino kissed Jen lightly on the cheek. "Stay up here out of sight until I tell you."

"Let me introduce you to my friends from the federal government." Mike grinned as Dino jumped down to the pier. "They'd prefer it if you didn't ask for their names or the particular agency they work for. They're very happy to take your guests off your hands."

"Can't be too soon for me." He looked back at the boat. "Here they come now."

Angel and his companion had half-walked, half-dragged the two men up on deck and guided them down the ladder to the pier. Two of the nameless men stepped forward.

"Happy to make your acquaintance," one of the team members said. "We've got just the place for you to visit."

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Dino waited until they were gone before motioning Jen down from the cockpit. He knew she was putting on a front for his friends but she nearly collapsed in his arms when he reached up to her.

"Almost done, *cara*," he whispered into her hair.

"Ethan wants us all at the compound," Mike told him. "Stuff's happening." He smiled at Jennifer. "And I'll bet you'd like to see your daughter."

"Oh, yes. Thank you." She looked at Dino. "Should we go get my stuff first?"

"No. Leave it here. You'll be coming back." He tightened his arm possessively around her as they walked down the pier.

* * * *

Ethan was waiting at the pad when the chopper landed, Deanne next to him clutching his hand. Jen was the first off the bird, racing to scoop her daughter up in her arms. Dino swung down and shook Ethan's hand.

"Thanks for the help." His words were simple but there was a wealth of friendship behind them.

Ethan nodded. "We're not finished yet. Come on in the house. I've been making phone calls and twisting arms. I think we're finally at the end of the road. And you'll be surprised at what Sean Garrett has for you."

Lisa was waiting for them in the kitchen, giving the men a quick smile before guiding Jen and Deanne to the room Deanne had been sleeping in so they could have some privacy. The men followed Ethan to the den where Sean

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Garret stood beside the desk, a small closed carton in front of him. Trying to wipe the grin from his face, he opened the carton and carefully removed two very old pieces. One was a gold dagger with a lapis lazuli handle and sheath. The other was a statue head, cast in copper.

"Are those what I think they are?" Dino asked.

Ethan nodded. "And you can thank young Mr. Garrett for inventive ingenuity. He's the one who found them."

"Where the hell were they?"

"I'll let our super agent here tell you since he was the one who figured it out."

Garrett looked as if he was about to explode. "They were in that van all the time. The one Mrs. Sutherland drove down here?"

Dino's eyebrows climbed almost to his hairline. "You're kidding me. Where in the wagon?"

"Apparently, Sutherland yanked out the back seat, padded it very well, stuffed these in there, and glued the seat back in place."

"What made you think of that?" Dino wanted to know.

Garrett looked from one man to the other. "We, uh, used that same thing on an op once before. It suddenly occurred to me that maybe Sutherland had figured it out as a hiding place, too. Remember, he had planned to be leaving the cabin with his wife and child. He'd want those items with him."

"Damn fine work," Dino said. "I'd like to tell Jen. And then what do we do with these things? How do we get them into the right hands?"

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"We're going to take a little trip, and those pieces will go with us."

"Trip? Exactly who is going and where?"

"You, me, and Jen. I figured Jen especially would want to be in on the finale."

"You *know* who it is? You figured it out?"

"With some very official help. Mike will chopper us to the airport where a private plane will be waiting for us. With a few people on board."

"E, what the hell is going on?"

"I can do some pretty fair arm twisting myself, when I need to." He motioned for Garrett to close up the box. "Now we can go tell Jen. Lisa's fixing us some sandwiches. After we eat we have to get going. Come on."

* * * *

Jen was sitting on the bed with Deanne on her lap. She was holding her so tightly the child finally squirmed in her arms.

"Mommy, you're squishing me."

"Sorry, baby. Sorry, sorry." She relaxed her grip. "I'm just so glad to see you." She wiped away the tears that kept leaking from her eyes and took a good look at her daughter.

"Are you doing okay?"

"Uh huh. They're very nice to me here."

Jen drank her in with her eyes. The fear was gone from her face and she actually had some color in her cheeks.

"They're nice people," Jen agreed.

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"They said you were helping them find out what happened and you were very important to a lot of people."

No kidding. A lot of the wrong people.

"I just want to be important to you, sweet pea." *And a lean, dark man with an earring and a ponytail.*

"Is everything over now? Can we go home?"

"Almost, honey." Jen smoothed her hand over her daughter's hair. "What if we didn't go back to Michigan to live? What if we went someplace else?"

Deanne wrinkled her forehead. "You mean like here? Where Jamie and his parents live?"

"Not exactly. Maybe someplace further south. Where it's warm all the time and you could go swimming every day."

"And you'd never have to leave me again? And no bad men would come after us?"

Jen hugged the slender body again. "No, baby. I'd never have to leave you. And I think we're all done with the bad men."

"More than you know."

Jen looked up and saw Ethan in the doorway, Dino behind him.

"I don't understand."

"Deanne." Ethan moved into the room, speaking to the little girl in a calm voice. "I'm going to borrow your mother for one quick trip, okay? And then she's all yours."

"A trip?" Jen looked from one man to the other. "What kind of trip? Where are we going?"

Now Dino came into the room and crouched down in front of Jen and her daughter. "Jennifer, our good friend Ethan has

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pulled a lot of strings to get at the truth here, and we'll finally get the answers we want. Don't you want to be in on the grand finale?"

She felt a tightness in her chest and looked up at Ethan. "You know who did all this? Who's responsible?"

"Close enough. The people we'll be taking the trip with know more than we do. They're the ones running this little show." He gave her a tiny grin. "And taking all the credit, of course."

"What about the two items that John ... took?"

Dino chuckled. "Safe and sound, believe it or not." He lifted his gaze to Dino who explained to Jen where and how the pieces had been found.

"You mean I've had them all this time? I drove all the way from Michigan with them practically under my rear end?"

"So it seems."

Deanne wriggled on her mother's lap and looked up into her face, the worry again clouding her eyes. "Why do you have to leave, Mommy? You just got here."

Dino took one of Deanne's hands, holding her small one gently in his larger one. "This is a very important trip, little one. But I'm going with your mother and I promise not to let anything happen to her, okay?"

She cocked her head at him and Jen noticed she left her hand in Dino's. "You took care of Mommy while she was gone, didn't you."

"Yes. The very best I could."

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"He took excellent care of me," Jen assured her, and turned her daughter around on her lap so they were facing each other. "See? Don't I look okay?"

Deanne looked hard at her mother, then turned back to Dino. "You said you're going with her on this trip. Right?"

Dino nodded.

"And Mr. Ethan, too?"

A tiny smile played at the corner of Dino's mouth. "And Mr. Ethan."

Deanne hopped off her mother's lap. "Then it's all right. You can go. But Mommy, you better get Miss Lisa to lend you some clothes. You can't go anywhere looking like that."

Everyone laughed, the little girl's words breaking the tension that was so tight in the room.

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Chapter Fifteen

Jennifer was still in shock and they hadn't even reached Detroit yet. Mike had deposited them at the private aircraft section of Tampa International Airport and Ethan had led them to a gleaming Gulfstream poised on the runway like a bird ready for flight. Which indeed it was. She was trying to control her nerves as she climbed the stairs to the plane between Ethan and Dino, wearing a shirtwaist dress and sandals borrowed from Lisa. She hadn't had much chance to do anything with her hair except brush it out, but Lisa had added a clip on one side and a pair of pearl earrings.

"Perfect," Lisa pronounced when she scrutinized her handiwork. "You'll knock their socks off."

"Just whose socks am I attacking?" Jen pried, trying to get some information.

"People who didn't take you seriously enough. Now go. They're waiting for you."

In the luxurious interior of the plane, Ethan introduced her to a man he called simply the director. He, in turn, waved at the three men with him in dark suits and smiled as he said, "My traveling companions."

The plane was set up with work stations and pairs of seats designed to look like easy chairs. Dino buckled Jen into one of them next to him, then took her hand and curled his fingers around it.

"Almost over, *cara*. Then you can get on with your life."

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"Yes. My life." She wet her lips with the tip of her tongue.
"And exactly where will that be?"

He leaned closer, his mouth next to her ear. "I think you know what I want. I don't want to rush you, and Deanne will need a period of adjustment. But I want your life to be part of mine. If you want that, too, the rest is just logistics."

Jen felt her insides shift and something warm settle inside her. She knew with a certainty that life with this man would finally give her what she wanted—security, stability, and most important of all, love. "Yes. I want that, too."

He squeezed her hand. "Then working out the 'how' will be easy."

Although Ethan dozed for most of the flight, neither Jen nor Dino could sleep. She kept her hand in his and let her dreams of the future occupy her brain. The director and his men were at the front of the plane, speaking in low tones so they couldn't be heard over the muted sound of the engines, and studying files they had with them.

When they landed at Detroit Metropolitan, two black SUVs were waiting for them, whisking them all along the expressway to downtown Detroit and the Robert J. McNamara Federal Building. Finally they were ushered into a large conference room and Jen had to cling to Dino's hand to keep from falling.

Sitting around the table were familiar but very angry faces—the Police Commissioner McWilliams, Senator Mackall and his wife, Mayor Sobol, an attorney name Daniel Hayes, Roger Wellborn, and some other members of the museum board whose names she couldn't remember at the moment.

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Several faces registered shock at seeing Jen walk in the door and a low buzz of conversation started until a man sitting between the commissioner and the mayor held up his hand and shook his head.

Was it true? Were these really the people behind the antiquities ring? Who'd ordered John's death and her kidnapping?

Five men dressed in suits to match her traveling companions were arranged around the room against the wall at strategic intervals. The director indicated where his men should deploy themselves, and pointed to chairs in one corner for Ethan, Jen, and Dino. Then he walked to the empty seat at the far end of the table.

"Thank you all for coming today," he began.

"Not that we had much choice," Monica Mackall said resentfully.

McWilliams fixed a hard look on the director. "I'd like to know what this is about. I'm a busy man. I run a large police department and I can't sit around some table twiddling my thumbs all day."

"I'm sure all your questions will be answered when you hear what I have to say." He took the folder he'd been carrying and opened it on the table in front of him. "It appears you've all been very busy people, you and others. Very busy."

Looking around the table, he launched into a monologue about the antiquities business, the illegal travel in stolen antiquities, and their role in it. He explained what had been

learned about John Sutherland's involvement and the scene at the cabin outside Detroit.

He lifted his eyes from the folder for a moment and scanned the table, coming to rest on one person. "Your cabin, by the way, Senator. And we found Sutherland's grave where your men dug it."

Jen had to swallow a gasp and Dino's hand tightened on hers.

The director resumed his little tale, explaining more for Jen's benefit than anyone else's how Roger Wellborn had personally recruited John, knowing he had a gambling habit that could be used to force him to process the antiquities for them. The private games at the men's club where he got in deeper and deeper.

He looked around the table again. "Figuring out who hired Grant Douglas was a little more difficult." He smiled at the stunned look on Louis McWilliams' face. "Oh, yes, we have Mr. Douglas in custody enjoying the fine hospitality of the U.S. government. And while there are four of you who had contact with him—or could have—through your military or ... other activities, we discovered, Commissioner, that you and Douglas had a quite history going way back. When we presented several options to him, some of them very unpleasant, he decided you'd have to handle this one on your own."

'Mac' McWilliams opened his mouth to say something but Monica Mackall gripped his arm.

"Shut up, Mac. This is so much speculation. They have no proof of anything, so don't give them any."

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"On the contrary, Mrs. Mackall." The director's smile had a decidedly wintry yet self-satisfied look to it. "After you left your office we had men dismantling your shipping and receiving department. Imagine our surprise to find four antiquities stolen from the museum in Baghdad in a carton marked electronic parts."

The director droned on but Jennifer finally tuned him out. It was all more than she could process. Apparently, there were fourteen people in all involved in this, all members of the museum board. They'd been making huge sums of money for years, buying on the black market, shipping in through the museum and selling to carefully selected buyers.

While the police commissioner was the muscle, so to speak, the mayor of Detroit, grey-haired and distinguished looking, was the ring leader. It was he who had put the group together to begin with and found the street dealer through contacts made when he was in the service. He, the commissioner, Monica Mackall, and gallery owner Patsy Morgan formed the inner circle.

No one said a word when the director finished his little tale, nor did they speak when he read the warrants for the arrest of each person at the table. McWilliams looked permanently stunned and Mackall's face had drained of all color. It was the women who looked ready for a cat fight.

As they were led away to be processed, Patsy Morgan stopped beside Jen, her face filled with hate.

"You think you're out of this scot free, don't you, you little bitch? Just be sure to keep looking over your shoulder for the

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rest of your life. You never know when one of us will be there."

"I wouldn't make threats I couldn't keep, Mrs. Morgan," the director told her. "You and your friends will be a guest of the federal government for so long you won't even know where to find Mrs. Sutherland, when and if you ever taste freedom again."

One of the men in suits grasped her arm and literally dragged her from the room.

The nameless man turned out to be the attorney who had accompanied everyone. Called hastily by the senator, he had requested a meeting with the director. One of the suits pointed him toward an office across the hall. He disappeared into it and then there were just four of them in the room.

"Well, Ethan," the director said, "have I sufficiently done penance for the unwarranted invasion into your files?"

"Yes, I'd say so. You were the only one who could have dug up the information to pinpoint Douglas's employer. And who had the clout to pull this off today."

"It always saddens me when people who have everything feel the need to have even more, and to get it by illegal means. Greed has brought down many, many people."

"They thought they were smarter than everyone else," Ethan commented. "But you and I have known a lot of people like that."

The director nodded. "Too many." He turned to Jen. "You're a very courageous woman, Mrs. Sutherland. And smart to head directly to my friend, Ethan, here. I hope that life will be much brighter for you from now on."

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"I intend to see that it is," Dino broke in.

The director allowed himself a tiny smile. "Very good then. Ethan? I have some projects I think we need to discuss. I'd like to stop by your place on my way back to Washington."

Now it was Ethan's turn to smile. "Any time. I'm happy to hear what you have to say, only—"

"I know," the director broke in. "No promises. Well, we'll see what happens. Now I'd better make sure those warrants are air tight and see if we've left anyone out."

He was gone and Jennifer stared from one man to the other. "So that's it? It's all over?"

"Finished, *cara*," Dino told her. "You have your life back."

"My new life," she reminded him.

He nodded. "Absolutely."

"Mike should be at the airport waiting for us," Ethan said. "I had him bring our own plane up here, figuring we might need a ride home. Let's go, kids. I don't know about you, but the faster I get out of here the better."

* * * *

The scandal gave the media something juicy to feast on for several days. The arrest of fourteen very wealthy, prominent, and well-connected people was all anyone could talk about. The aftershocks were felt everywhere, especially when the extent of the operation was revealed.

The phalanx of high-priced lawyers retained by the accused were good for daily sound bytes, but the picture most often shown was of Monica Mackall throwing a

screaming fit at her arraignment hearing, looking for all the world like a harpy.

Jennifer and Deanne stayed safely hidden away at Ethan's, invisible and unavailable to even the most diligent members of the media. Dino was back in Key West, attending to things both business and personal. He and Jen spoke at least twice a day.

"Thanks for letting us stay here," Jen told Lisa over coffee one morning. "So much has happened I can't even think what I'm going to do next. You have no idea how much I appreciate you letting us intrude this way."

Lisa gave her a warm smile. "It's no intrusion, believe me." She poured her own coffee and sat down at the table with Jen. "Have you made any decision about where you're going from here?"

Jen felt a blush heat her cheeks. "Ethan's being kind enough to handle things in Michigan for me. Apparently, John had a will, which Ethan's arranged to have someone take care of. He found a buyer for the house once probate is complete, and had someone pack up my clothes and Deanne's as well as a few other things I thought she should have. He has a friend storing them until I decide where to ship them."

"You're not going back up north."

Jen shivered. "Not in a million years. That place holds nothing but bad memories for me." She felt herself blush again. "I'm thinking of heading further south."

Lisa grinned. "Would I be overstepping here by asking if there's a special reason for that direction?"

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"I think there is. I hope so. We ... he ... hasn't said anything specific but we're making some plans. I need a little space right now and he's willing to give it to me." She laughed. "But he says as long as it's no further than a block away from him."

"I'd say anyone looking at the two of you together wouldn't have any questions about your future."

Jen fiddled with her coffee cup. "Remember, I have Deanne to consider. I need a situation that's permanent for her. Stable. I'm very lucky she's survived what's happened as well as she has."

"I definitely agree." Lisa's face sobered. "Have you decided what to tell Deanne about Ethan?"

Jen took a long swallow of coffee, then set her cup down very carefully. "Ethan and I talked about it." She shook her head. "I can't believe I'm discussing this with his wife. You're a very unusual woman."

"No, I don't think so. Just one who's very secure in her marriage. So, did you come to any conclusions?"

Jen hesitated before she answered. "We've decided to tell her the truth. For a lot of reasons, secrets have a way of coming out when you least want them to. If she found out accidentally the impact could really be negative. And the two of them seem to have bonded while she's been here."

"Ethan and I also discussed it," Lisa said, "and decided we'd follow your lead. He's changed so much in the past couple of years, and family has become really important to him. And we'd like Jamie to know that he has a sister." She sipped at her coffee. "When do you plan to tell her?"

"Today. In fact, I'm going to talk to her in a little while. And if things go well, then I'd like Ethan to join the conversation." She looked at Lisa hesitantly. "If that's okay with you."

"Absolutely."

"But first I need to let Dino know what I'm doing." She rose from her chair. "In case it changes what ... how he feels. About me. Us."

"I don't think it will," Lisa assured her. "Anyone who knows him can see he's crazy about you, but you're smart to do it this way. And Deanne's a super kid, Jen. You've done a fantastic job with her."

"Thank you." She finished her coffee and looked at her watch. "Dino's supposed to call in a few minutes. He's been working on something for me and he thinks he has good news."

Lisa stood up, too, and Jen found herself being hugged. "Whatever happens, I wish you the very, very best. And I hope you and Dino find the same thing Ethan and I have."

"Me, too," Jen told her, returning the hug. "Cross your fingers for us, okay? I want to be finished with riding life's merry-go-round and missing the brass ring."

"Oh, I don't think you need crossed fingers anymore. I think Dino's got everything well in hand for the three of you."

Jen's cell phone rang and she flipped it open, smiling as she heard Dino's voice. As she listened to his words her heart thrummed with pleasure. The merry-go-round was about to stop after all.

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Epilogue

Jen sat on the porch of her rented bungalow, rocking on the wooden swing that hung from the ceiling, and sipping a glass of iced tea. The sun was finally sliding toward the horizon and Dino and Deanne would be returning shortly. He'd been teaching the little girl to fish, taking her to quiet coves to learn. Deanne was beside herself with excitement. Sometimes Jen went with them but today Dino had told her it was a special trip for the two of them.

She didn't mind. Dino and Deanne got along very well. She related to him much better than she had ever related to John Sutherland. For the first time in longer than she could remember, Jen saw her child relaxed and happy, the nightmare behind her and every day filled with pleasant memories.

Telling her about Ethan had been easier than she'd expected. It was a lot for a seven-year-old to swallow, and she'd been full of questions, including why they wouldn't all be living together. Jen and Ethan answered everything honestly, and after two days the little girl seemed to settle into the situation. Dino supported Jen's decision completely, but let it be known he intended to keep his place in Deanne's life, also. Now Jen and Ethan were discussing a visitation schedule that would work for everyone.

They'd been in Key West a month now, staying in a bungalow Dino had found for them. He was as good as his

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word about not pushing her, but he'd made sure the house was only two doors down from his.

"Very convenient," she chuckled. "How much did you have to pay the guy to move out so we could stay here?"

"You wound me, *cara*," he told her, but a grin played at the corner of his mouth.

Having a child around, one they wanted to make sure felt included in their lives, didn't give them much private time. Luckily Deanne found a friend five doors away and the occasional sleepover was like a gift. Jen and Dino made every moment together count, their lovemaking sensual and heated and very soul satisfying.

They learned about each other, their quirks and habits, their likes and dislikes. And grew closer every day.

Jen discovered she loved the pace of life on the island and found herself fitting right in. Dino had only taken out day charters the last few weeks, and Jen had begun putting together her graphics design business again.

"It's all done via the Internet," she told Dino. "And I do need to earn some money. Otherwise I feel like a beggar."

He understood at once her need for financial freedom and didn't argue, just sent as many clients her way as he could. The money from the sale of the house and anything else left in John's estate went into a trust fund for Deanne, for college.

Jen had to pinch herself daily to believe how well everything was turning out.

Her reverie now was interrupted by the roar of the engine on Dino's motorcycle. Jen had nearly had a heart attack the first time he took Deanne out on it, but the little girl always

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had her helmet on, and Dino had drilled her on motorcycle safety. Besides, seeing the huge smile on her daughter's face smoothed away many of Jen's fears.

The bike pulled into her driveway. Dino killed the engine, and he and Deanne hopped off.

"Did you catch any fish?" Jen asked, hugging her daughter.

"Not today, Mommy. We were too busy talking."

Jen looked over her head at Dino, who had a mysterious look in his eyes.

"Oh, oh. Are you two cooking up some trouble?"

Deanne wriggled out of her mother's arms and looked up at her with an earnest expression. "Dino has something to ask you, Mommy. He asked me today what I thought about it, and we talked a long time. I said okay. I thought it would be a great idea. Now you have to say yes, too."

"And exactly what would I be agreeing to?"

Deanne took in a deep breath and let it out. "My friend, Leslie, has two daddies but only one lives with her, and she loves them both. Daddy Ethan lives with Lisa and Jamie so he can't live with us. And I think I should have a daddy who lives with me."

It was the longest speech Jen had ever heard her make. Jen's heart was thumping at what she was sure was behind it, but she kept her voice as calm as she could.

"And did you and Dino come up with a solution?"

"Uh huh." She bobbed her head. "I told him I'd like him to be my daddy, too, and live with us. Dino asked if he could marry us and I said yes. Now it's your turn." She grabbed her mother's hand. "Please say yes, okay?"

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Jen looked up at Dino, whose eyes twinkled with mischief. "Figured you'd cover all the other bases first, did you?"

He laughed. "I'm a careful man and always have a plan."

"Well, Mommy?" Deanne hopped from foot to foot. "We wouldn't have to live in two houses. And you and Dino wouldn't have to make plans for me so you could be alone together."

Jen burst out laughing. "How did you get so wise?" She looked up at Dino again. "You know, I thought I'd been around on the merry-go-round too many times already and I'd missed the brass ring completely."

"You've had your last ride on it, Jen. And the ring won't be brass, it will be gold. Say yes and put me out of my misery."

"Yes, I'll marry you, Dino." She laughed again, a sound of pure joy. "Yes, yes, yes."

All the anxiety smoothed away from Dino's face. He pulled Jen off the swing and enveloped both mother and daughter in a huge bear hug.

"And soon, okay?" he asked.

"Very soon." She smiled. "Very, very soon."

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About the author...

It seems all my life I've been making up stories in my head, waiting for the time I could write them down. All my life experiences have added to the cartons of ideas stored in my head. I was the first female sports reporter on a college newspaper, managed rock bands and country singers, worked in retail, worked for newspapers, worked in public relations for two universities. Now I live in the beautiful Texas Hill Country with my husband and our three cats. Our children are all grown and are my biggest supporters.

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